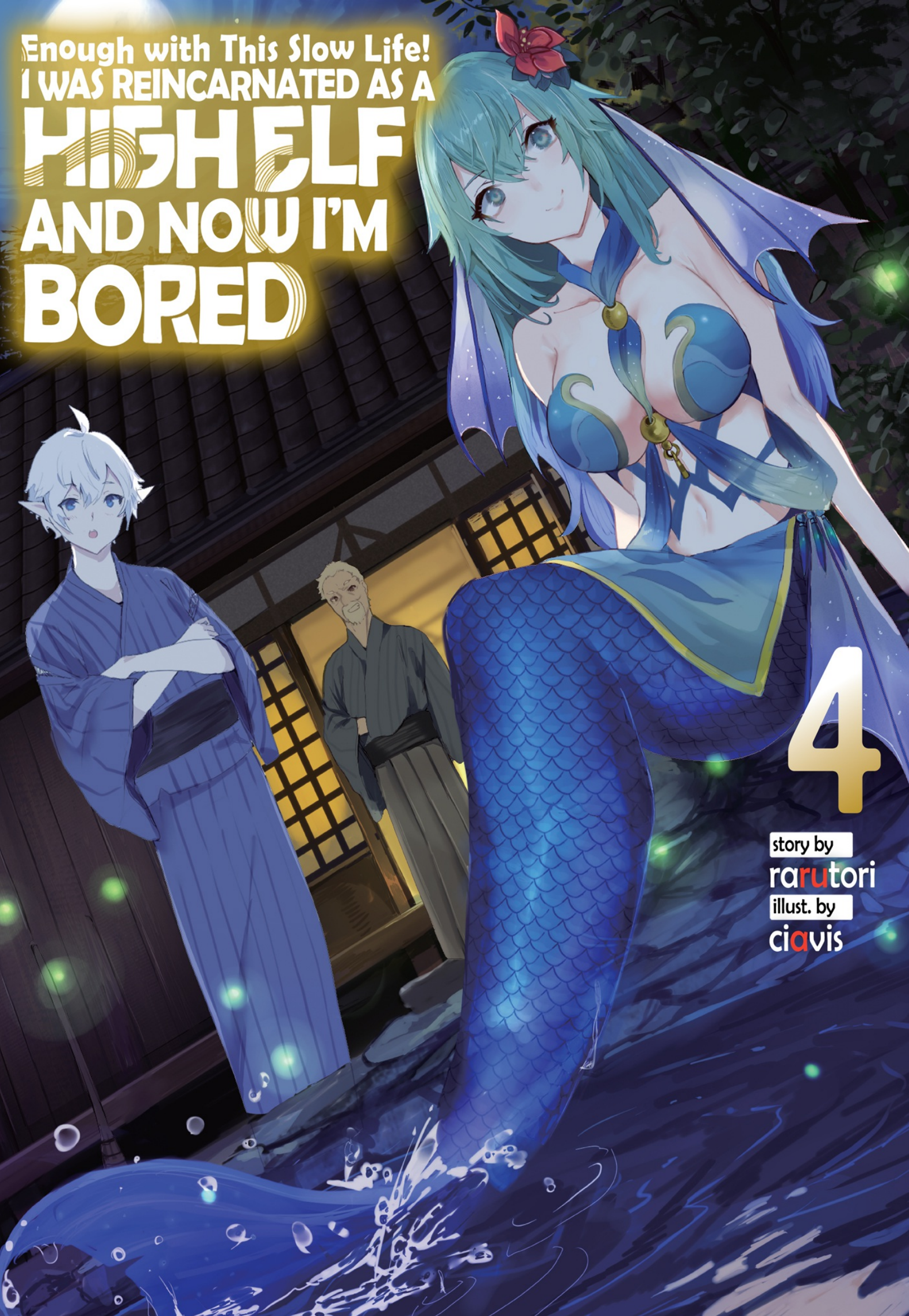


Enough with This Slow Life!
I WAS REINCARNATED AS A
HIGH ELF
AND NOW I'M
BORED

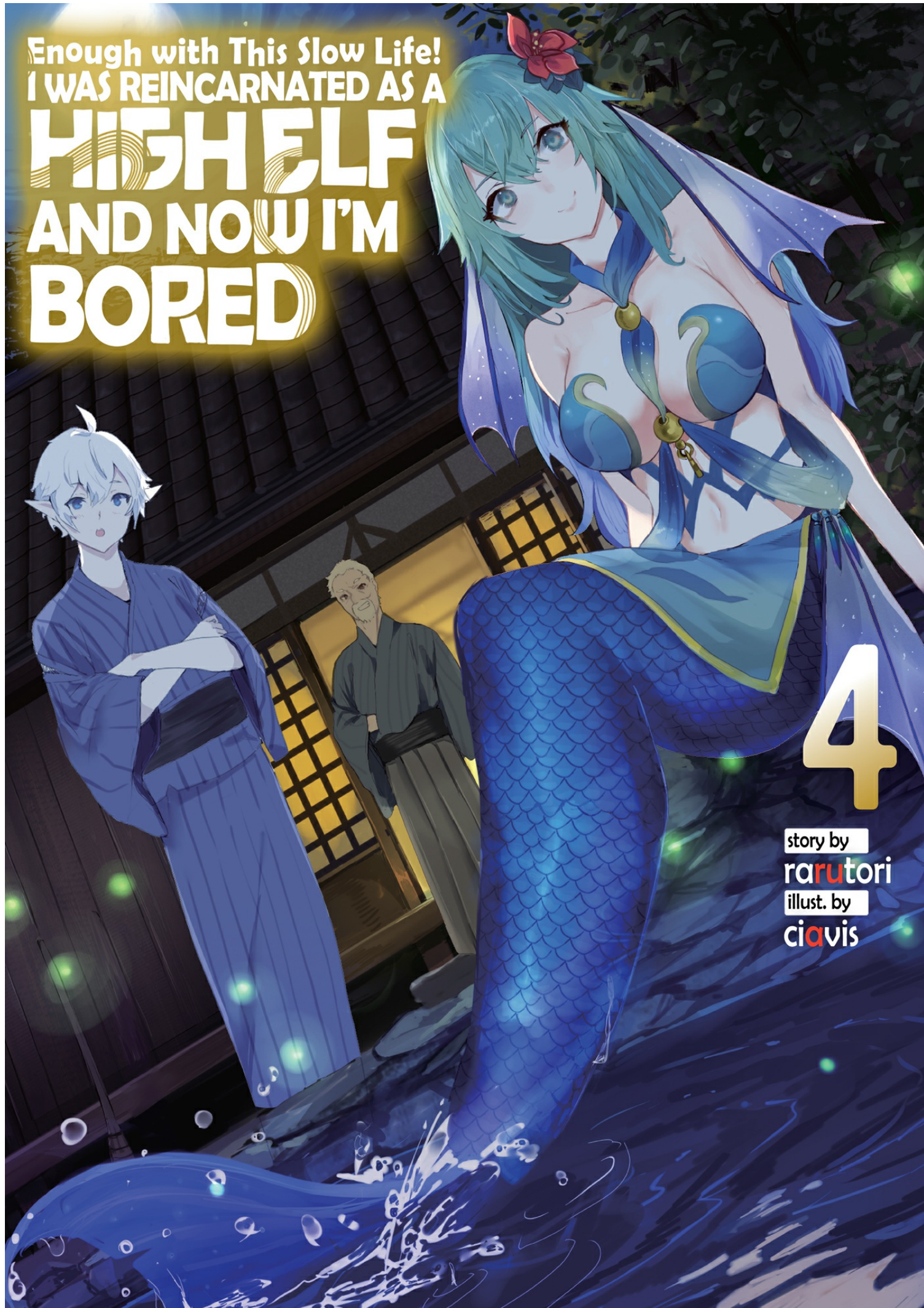


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story by
rarutori
illust. by
ciavis



Enough with This Slow Life!
I WAS REINCARNATED AS A
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BORED



4

story by
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"DAY DRINKING ISN'T SO BAD SOMETIMES, IS IT?"

GONZOU

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'SOMETIMES'?! YOU'RE ALWAYS DRINKING TOO MUCH!"

MIZUHO

"A drink after some exercise feels great!"

ACER

I sang to myself an old poem, written by a poet named Rajena Bogata, that had been arranged into a song by the elven minstrel Huratio.

"Oh, hey! I know that one!" Aina shouted happily, pulling at my hand.

"The wind calls the clouds, the clouds scatter rain about the land.
The damp earth gives birth to wheat, which grows into a shimmering, golden sea waving in the wind.
A stone ship floats in that sea of gold, by the name of Janpemon.
The city of wheat, beloved of the wind, water, and earth.
Carried forth by that beauty, it will certainly last forever..."

AINA



CHARACTERS

Enough with This Slow Life!
I WAS REINCARNATED AS A
HIGH ELF
AND NOW I'M
BORED



Acer
A whimsical high elf with a thousand-year life span. He is thoroughly enjoying the food and drink at the end of his journey.



Gonzou
A carefree old man Acer met at a bar in Fusou. Nicknamed "Old Gon."

Gonzou

Mizuyo
A merfolk staying at Gonzou's mansion. Knows much about Fusou's history.



Mizuyo



Aina
Nonna's great-granddaughter. Full of energy and loves sweets, just like her great-grandmother.

Aina

After Win's departure and Kaeha's passing, Acer began a new journey to take his mind off the sorrow of those heart-wrenching goodbyes. He decided to visit the far east, where Kaeha once told him the Yosogi School found its origins.

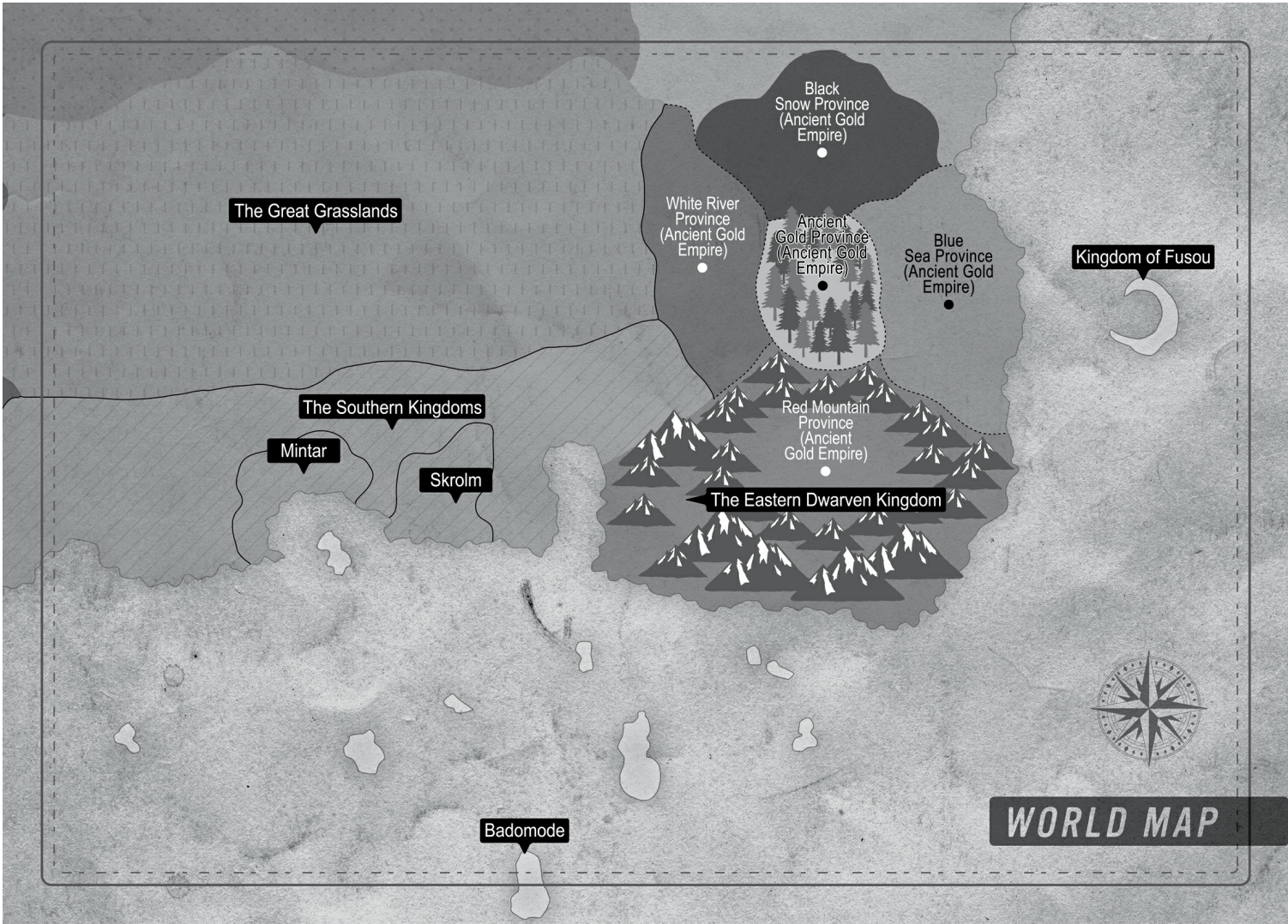
On the way, he rescued a tribe of grassland nomads from peril and took on a group of their children as his disciples. After entering the Ancient Gold Empire, he worked with an Errant named Jizou to crush a criminal organization. He then met with a true dragon, telling his life's story and the wonderfulness of the world to spare it from the dragon's flames.

After many long diversions, he finally boards a ship to his true objective, the far east island nation of Fusou. According to Wanggui Xuannu from the Ancient Gold Empire, it is a nation characterized by the massive Fusou Tree planted by the ancient true giants, where the people are locked in an endless war with the oni.

His mind racing in anticipation of this yet unseen kingdom, Acer begins his voyage across the sea.

STORY





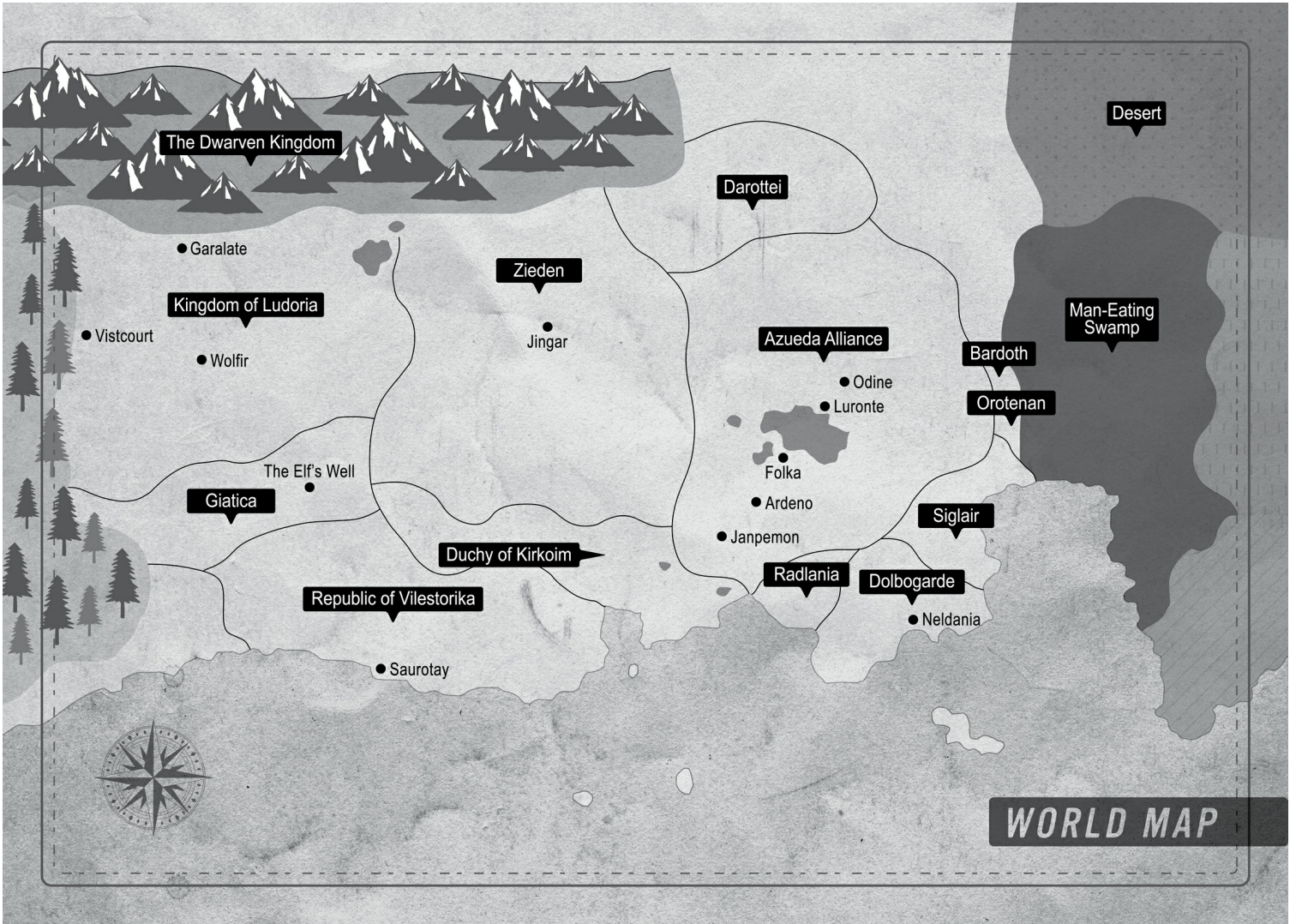


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Chapter 1 — Above the Cloud-Scraping Tree

“Please, Mr. Forestfolk, I’m begging you! Don’t fall!” The ship’s captain called out to me from the bottom of the mast.

I suppose it might have been going too far, asking for permission to come up here. But the feeling of the wind at the top of the mast on a ship sailing across the ocean was so strong and energizing, it really filled my heart with excitement.

Now that I thought about it, this was my first time on a ship that was sailing on the ocean. Looking down from up here, I could get a good idea of just how massive the ship was. There was no way a vessel of this size could navigate inland rivers with how deep the hull sat under the water.

A sudden strong gust of wind struck me, powerful enough that an ordinary human would have likely been blown off of their perch. But I was a high elf. I gave a single word of caution to the wind, letting it know that falling would be dangerous for me, and it slipped past without pushing on me at all. The feeling of having the wind ruffle your hair or flutter your cloak without putting any pressure on your body would have likely seemed quite strange to humans.

My faint memories of my past life reminded me I had once been human too, but by this point, I was fully adapted to my life as a high elf. However, the land of Fusang that we were approaching had a culture that sounded similar to that of the place I’d lived in my previous life. What would I see there? How would it make me feel? I couldn’t wait to find out.

At the bottom of the mast, the captain looked up at me in resignation, though still too concerned about my well-being to leave. Even if by some freak accident I slipped and fell, I could always use magic to float myself down to the deck...but that seemed to be beside the point.

I decided it was about time to head back down. I had been granted passage on this ship as a favor, so I didn’t want to leave too much of a negative impression. Before descending, I took one last look ahead. I still couldn’t see

our destination, the kingdom of Fusang.

Heading east from Ancient Gold Province brought me to Blue Sea Province. Heading farther east, I found a large port on the coast. I boarded a large ship there and continued across the sea, heading for Fusang. I had booked passage on the ship with help from the emperor, Longcui Dijun, and the governor of Blue Sea Province, Zhang Shegong.

It had taken about a year to get to this point after my last conversation with the golden dragon, most of that time spent trying to make something from the scales he had left for me as a gift. You couldn't melt them, you couldn't break them, and you couldn't cut them. They might have been the ultimate material, but they were useless without a way to work with them. For example, even diamonds didn't hold much value before technology had developed to cut and polish them. The mystics hadn't been given scales like this before either, so even with their help, it was quite a task.

At any rate, it had been a long and arduous process of trial and error to find out how much heat it took to melt them and how much force it took to break them. This was all necessary because, unprocessed, they stood out too much and were far too large to carry around.

In the end, I had settled for the brute force method. I had Baimao Laojun use magic to reduce the scales' durability so I could then cut through them with my magic sword. Even then, it felt like it had only barely worked.

One interesting discovery I made through the process of trying to work with the dragon scales was that they generated a strange energy when coming in contact with mithril. It was a similar phenomenon to the power that filled the air around the sleeping golden dragon, and it could be used somewhat like mana. That meant that with mithril, a golden dragon scale, and something to act as a conductor like Fairy's Silver, you should be able to make powerful relics that anyone could use. The idea was certainly intriguing, but the required materials were too rare to be a realistic prospect. Leaving Fairy's Silver aside, it wasn't really possible for any normal person to get their hands on mithril or dragon scales. With the mithril of my armband, I had both, but generating mana that was beyond my control was too dangerous for me to make regular use of.

I sewed some of the broken pieces of scale into my cloak to serve as armor, then put the remainder away in my pack. I was sure I'd come up with a good use for them eventually. With a handful of mystic peaches already inside, my backpack might well have been the most valuable item in the world at the moment. Not that anyone would know by looking at it.

I had decided to leave Sayr behind in Ancient Gold Province. Between his mate, his children, and the loving care he received there, I couldn't bring myself to pull him away from all those blessings just to save myself the trouble of walking. Maybe it wasn't the correct attitude to take toward a horse, but I had known him since he was born, so I often thought of him as a friend or as my own child.

When I had made to leave Ancient Gold Province behind and he had stepped forward to walk alongside me, I just about broke down into tears. But even so, I left him behind.

So now, as I made my way to the kingdom of Fusang, I was once again traveling alone. I had traveled from the Great Grasslands to the Ancient Gold Empire, from White River Province up to Black Snow Province, then down again to Ancient Gold Province, all swaying on Sayr's back. The loneliness I felt now was proof of just how much I had enjoyed that journey with him.



"Why are you heading to Fusang anyway, Mr. Forestfolk? The only people who go there are warriors trying to make a name for themselves." In the middle of our voyage, the captain suddenly approached me with that question. Apparently he had decided he couldn't let me out of his sight for the rest of the journey.

This was a trade ship, so I didn't think he needed to pay me any more mind than the goods he was shipping. Maybe I had been a bit too rambunctious for my first experience on the sea. If I hadn't been personally set up by the emperor and governor of Blue Sea Province, I probably would have eaten a fist or two by now. Perhaps some self-reflection was in order.

Thinking back on the captain's words, I could see that the other passengers who had booked a voyage on this ship had a much more intense atmosphere

about them. They were all proud errants or seasoned mercenaries. Either way, they all were headed to Fusang to make a living from their strength in arms. I was going for a much different reason, though.

“I’m just sightseeing. I heard there was a huge tree growing there and thought it would be a good idea to take a look at it.”

The captain at first seemed taken aback by my answer but soon nodded in acceptance. There couldn’t have been many people so whimsical as to travel across the world to see a big tree, but as I was an elf—or rather, in his eyes a forestfolk, a member of a race that lived in close harmony with the forest—it must have made sense to him. It definitely wasn’t just him realizing once again how much of a weirdo I was. But it was true; I had no intention of fighting, and I just wanted to see the Fusang Tree for myself.

To be clear, I held no enmity for demons or their oni offspring who inhabited that land now. Though the high elves considered them a threat and had been instrumental in driving them to extinction, I had no personal obligation to take up that cause. And besides, the oni living in Fusang weren’t actually demons, just their descendants. There was a big difference there.

Demons had transformed themselves with mana in hopes of achieving immortality. If they had succeeded, there would have been no need for them to leave behind children. Similar to the true dragons, there would be no need for them to reproduce. High elves were a bit different, I supposed. We were only immortal in spirit, so our bodies still perished eventually.

I didn’t know if any demons had actually achieved immortality, but I suspected the ones protected by the true giants had died out if they felt the need to leave children behind. That meant even from my position as a high elf, there was no reason for me to treat them as enemies.

Whether these oni were better thought of as people or monsters was a different question altogether, but the answer didn’t matter much to me. I wasn’t a fan of the senseless killing of either. But of course, I had no idea what the oni would think of me.

The island of Fusang had a sharp curve to it, forming a perfect crescent moon

shape. Apparently the first visitors to the island had referred to it as “Cup Island.” At present, the northern half of the island was ruled by the oni, while the southern half was controlled by an alliance of humans, skyfolk, and merfolk.

This ship was headed to the southern tip of the crescent moon, a trade port known as Sunsea Harbor. It was the one port that allowed entry to the land of Fusang. The trip from Blue Sea Province to Sunsea Harbor in Fusang would usually take about a week, but with the length of that journey being highly dependent on the wind and currents, that was little more than an educated guess. Of course, with me on board, there was no way the ship could avoid being thoroughly blessed by both, so our journey was a short five days. The trip was smooth enough to leave the veteran captain of the ship in shock.

The captain was unable to keep the relief from his expression when I finally disembarked, thanking him over and over for his hospitality. Crossing the gangplank, I touched down on solid ground once again.

I had made it to Fusang. Thinking back on it, I was surprised to realize it had now been fifteen years since I left Ludoria. It had felt like a much quicker journey, but I supposed I had taken quite a few detours along the way. All that aside, I had finally made it to my destination.

Cargo from the ship was off-loaded onto smaller boats, which were then drawn along the water by merfolk. In Fusang, the sea belonged to them. It seemed merfolk drawing cargo through the water on these small boats was completely ordinary here.

Of course, that was a sight you would never find on the mainland. It was quite interesting to watch. Having been unexpectedly greeted with a sight I couldn't have predicted in the least, I was already smiling.

I had heard there were also merfolk living outside of Fusang. For example, in Vilestorika, I had heard that trade with foreign continents had only been established with the help of the merfolk who inhabited the sea. However, merfolk working and living together with humans like this was exceptionally rare.

I had come here in search of the homeland of the Yosogi School and to see the Fusang Tree, but I was starting to realize I'd be witnessing many more

interesting things besides.



The two things that quickly caught my eye while walking through Sunsea Harbor were the differences in culture—evident even in the clothing the people wore—and the presence of merfolk.

I had seen all sorts of different clothing, architecture, and people during my time traveling through the Great Grasslands and the Ancient Gold Empire, but this place had an even more striking contrast. There was really no word more fitting to describe it than “Japanese.” The people walking along the streets wore kimono and traditional Japanese-style sandals known as *zori*. I had seen them all before when I lived together with Kaeha, but seeing so many in one place was quite a different spectacle. I had vague memories of similar clothing in my past life, but it felt like I had never worn them myself. The greater impact on me was the fact that it made the connection between Kaeha’s family and this country feel all that more real.

As one might expect, the merfolk couldn’t come up onto land. Still, they gladly answered my questions about themselves. According to them, the merfolk had built cities in the sea sheltered by the crescent of the island, throwing their lot in with the human kingdoms in southern Fusang—or as the island was known locally, Fusou.

In short, the merfolk had joined the humans in their war against the oni. That said, the oni weren’t reckless enough to attack the merfolk in their aquatic cities, and the merfolk weren’t capable of coming up onto land to fight the oni, so they weren’t exactly in direct conflict. The merfolk likely functioned as logistical support for the southern kingdom. For example, if soldiers rode in a small boat pulled by merfolk, they could attack any place on the island that faced the ocean. Even without engaging in combat, the merfolk were undoubtedly an incredible asset.

A merfolk city, huh?

Right now, all the merfolk I could see pulling boats around were male, but if I went to a city, there would no doubt be women too. Though the thought was intriguing, I didn’t expect an underwater city to have much in the way of good

food. Unless they had sealed buildings with air inside, it would be impossible to make a cooking fire, and you'd get a mouthful of seawater with every bite. I could breathe underwater with the help of spirits, but they couldn't help me eat.

Above all, I had just gotten off a boat, so I wanted to spend a bit of time on land first. The city of Sunsea Harbor was much livelier and more populated than I had expected, perhaps because it was so far from the front lines.

Attracting no small number of curious gazes, I made my way through the streets looking for a money changer. If I was planning on traveling over land to see the Fusou Tree, it would help to have some local currency, even if the exchange would cost me. Regardless of their value, paying with local currency instead of foreign currency left a much different impression. Trying to pay with something unfamiliar would make anyone cautious of me, appearing as though I were trying to swindle them. That suspicion could lead to them overcharging me or refusing my business altogether, so the safest and cheapest option was for me to exchange for some local money. That said, the ones creating suspicion by causing that sort of trouble often came out on top in the end.

After getting some local money, I headed to a restaurant that served local workers and enjoyed some buckwheat noodles. They were authentic, hand cut and prepared noodles, served cold on a plate to be dipped into a thick soup before eating. I had stepped in just to get a quick bite to eat but had found something unexpectedly delicious. The pleasant aroma of the food and the ease with which you could eat it certainly played a part in that.

The sight of an elf chowing down without any reservation must have been quite interesting, as the shop gradually filled with people around me, ordering their own noodles while they watched me eat mine. I was used to people staring at me by now, so it didn't really bother me. Besides, if it was helping the store out, then I was happy to lend a hand.

My memories of my past life had been stimulated by this country in a way they never had before. Of course, there was no such thing as merfolk in my past life, but the culture of Fusou was otherwise incredibly similar. And as far as the noodles went, the food was similar too. Buckwheat grew in the central region of

this world's mainland too, but it was made into things like galettes and pancakes rather than anything resembling these noodles.

Having spent so long in a forest where I ate nothing but fruit, I'd developed a strong desire to try a variety of good food. I wasn't craving anything in particular. Whether it was meat or fish; potatoes, grains, or vegetables; sweet, sour, or spicy; anything good was welcome.

I had been able to eat rice while living on the grasslands and in the Ancient Gold Empire, but either the breed of rice or style of cooking was so different that it didn't really strike me. But now, eating these all-too-familiar noodles filled me with a pleasant surge of nostalgia. Even the soup seemed to have something close to soy sauce in it.

While living at Kaeha's place, though we used chopsticks to eat, we could only really access food grown nearby, so we still ate local food like porridge. Of course there were times we could get our hands on imported goods to make things like rice or other Japanese-style dishes, but they were only for very special occasions.

I started to wish I could share these foods with Kaeha and her mother, Kuroha. Would they have liked them? What would they have said?

With those thoughts in mind, I finished off my plate...and started to grow jealous of the man beside me enjoying a drink. After noodles came sake. They were a perfect match. I got the impression you were supposed to enjoy a drink while waiting for the noodles to be served.

If only I had found an inn already, I would have been able to enjoy a drink too. Searching for an inn while stinking of alcohol would earn me no favors, and since it was my first time visiting this country, it would be far too reckless to spend the whole night drinking. So first, I would need to find a place to stay the night.

Though reluctantly, I abstained from ordering a drink for myself as I looked around at everyone else's. It seemed they were drinking either fully clear or unrefined *sake*. That meant the drinks were most likely made from rice.

"It was delicious, thank you." Paying my bill with a word of thanks, I left the restaurant behind. Noodles weren't enough to satisfy me. I needed to find an

inn for the night, and then a place to drink.

Anticipation of delicious food and delicious drinks filled my heart.



Port towns were places where all sorts of people and things gathered. Even in a country with an entirely new culture, that rule didn't change. That gathering of people and goods inevitably brought information along with them. In the same way, it brought many strangers to town, meaning the locals were more comfortable with outsiders than in a far-off rural town, where outsiders would always be regarded with a level of suspicion.

In other words, it was quite convenient that my first steps in Fusou were in a port town. Though of course, being an island nation, it wasn't exactly possible for me to start anywhere else.

At any rate, I decided to stay in Sunsea Harbor for a time and learn about Fusou for myself. From geography to cultural customs, important laws and the way people here thought, there were plenty of things I needed to learn. Though the culture in Fusou was similar to the world of my previous life, it could be extremely dangerous to rely on that assumption.

No matter how similar they might have appeared, this was not Japan. This was a nation at war with a race of oni. The common sense and ethics I had learned in my previous life held no sway here.

That aside, I had two primary objectives here in Fusou. The first was my original goal of finding the homeland of the Yosogi School. The second was to find the symbol of the island, the Fusou Tree, for myself.

I didn't actually know if the Yosogi School still existed here in Fusou. After all, there had to be a reason it had traveled as far as the kingdom of Ludoria on the mainland. There was a good chance that not only the Yosogi School itself, but all records of it here in Fusou had long been lost. Luckily for me, I had all the time in the world to look for it. And my second objective, the Fusou Tree, definitely wasn't going anywhere. Searching every corner of the island would be a challenge, but as I learned the local customs, grew familiar with the country, and made friends, my reach would steadily grow.

It would be best to assume I'd be staying here for ten to twenty years. If I stayed any longer, there might not be any familiar faces left when I finally returned to the center of the continent. I intended to finish my search in as timely a manner as possible so I could make it back there.

"Well, don't you have some funny-looking clothes? How far did you travel to get here?"

As I sat at what had become my regular restaurant, enjoying some food and drink, a man looking like a merchant who happened to be sitting beside me struck up a conversation. It had been about a week since my arrival in Sunsea Harbor, and I had already heard the same question plenty of times.

"Far, far to the west. On the other side of the Ancient Gold Empire are the Great Grasslands, and I come from beyond that," I replied with a strained smile.

Surprisingly, what made me stand out in this country was not my being an elf. Rather than my race, it was my clothing that attracted all the curious glances. It seemed the people here thought of "foreign" as being synonymous with the Ancient Gold Empire, so they were quite curious to see someone who didn't look like they came from there either. And while my pointed ears were unique, the presence of merfolk and skyfolk in Fusou meant that seeing people of other races wasn't especially uncommon. Being a foreigner stood out much more. It was quite an interesting state of affairs.

Of course, there were plenty of cities that housed people of multiple races. Even in Ludoria, there were dwarven blacksmiths living alongside humans, as well as more eccentric elves traveling around as adventurers. In White River Province in the empire, there were earthfolk like Jizou working too. However, the nonhuman races were still quite few in number, so even when they were neighbors or friends, they still weren't quite members of the "in" group.

The difference there might have been subtle, and it was a division I was well aware could be crossed. Kaeha's love for me was ample evidence of that. But there was only one other case I could think of where members of a foreign race were accepted by the general population as fellow citizens: Win and I in the kingdom of the dwarves. It was an extremely rare, very special case.

Yet in Fusou, merfolk, skyfolk, and humans lived alongside each other like it was only natural. So rather than my race, it was my place of birth that piqued everyone's interest, and similarly built up walls between us. The more I spoke with the people in Sunsea Harbor, the stronger that feeling became.

What had happened to create this kind of environment? I didn't especially mind the people putting up walls between us. As I had mentioned before, it was more than possible for an individual to cross over them. But I was very curious why their society had become like this.

Fusou had presented me with yet another mystery to solve.



Through being a little generous with my coin, funding drinks for myself and a few other bored-looking people I ran into, I collected what information I could about Fusou. One of the things that stood out first was how interesting the capital, a city called Outo, seemed to be.

Apparently there were five large cities here in Fusou, Sunsea Harbor being the first of them. As its name suggested, it functioned as the kingdom's primary and only port town where the people of Fusou could engage in trade with those from the mainland. It was a natural gathering place for people and goods, making it a great place to collect information. But if I wanted to find the source of the Yosogi School and learn how the kingdom had become what it was, I would need to head farther inland. Sunsea Harbor was little more than the gateway leading into Fusou.

The capital, Outo, would be a two-week walk along the road northeast from Sunsea Harbor. The name meant something like "central city," and so as you might expect, it was located in the dead center of the kingdom. That said, it wasn't in the middle of the entire island. It only occupied the central region of the southern kingdom.

Heading east from the capital leads to a hilly region containing the city of Tendake, where the skyfolk called home. West of the capital was the ocean, but if you kept going, you would eventually find the merfolk city of Shin. North of the capital was the fortress city of Chinju, the front line in the war against the oni. There were other cities throughout the kingdom, of course, but these five

formed the critical structure making up Fusou.

Being geographically in between all of the other cities, the capital became a place where the three races of Fusou mingled freely. It was quite the intriguing story. While I could certainly see humans and merfolk working together here in Sunsea Harbor, there were no skyfolk around. After learning that there were quite a few blacksmiths and martial arts schools in the capital, and having learned a fair amount about the nature and culture of Fusou, I had no reason not to go there.

I left Sunsea Harbor behind and headed northeast, where I eventually came across a wide, flooded rice paddy. It was a rather rare sight for me in this world. The scene filled me with an unexpected sense of homesickness. It shouldn't have had any particular significance to me as I was now, but it somehow still felt nostalgic. Even searching through my faint memories of my past life, I couldn't remember ever seeing something like this.

The road leading to the capital cut through what appeared to be a major agricultural region. Being so far from the front lines, it felt like they were trying to leverage every bit of land they could to produce the food needed to supply the war effort. Apparently long ago, though quite rarely, the oni would travel down rivers leading off of the Fusou Tree to attack land even this far south. Their objective was to kidnap the women here, and specifically the human ones. That danger had mostly passed, with the border so strictly guarded that even if they were able to sneak through, it would be almost impossible for them to return home with their spoils.

The oni were stronger and lived much longer than the other races, but they were far, far smaller in number. That seemed to be standard for long-lived races, and when coupled with the fact they had been on the edge of extinction, it was no surprise at all. When it came to battle, numbers meant a lot. To fill the gaps in their ranks, the oni made use of human women to produce half-oni.

Stronger than a human but weaker than an oni, these half-breeds matured much faster and populated a kind of slave-warrior class in the northern kingdom. These half-oni were also capable of producing half-oni children of their own. The battlefields in the center of the island were mostly populated by

these half-oni. My guess was that the oni here were the descendants of humans that had turned into demons.

As far as I knew, it was extremely difficult for humans, elves, and dwarves to produce offspring with each other. If, by some chance, a half-breed was born, their ability to reproduce would also be significantly limited. Though I didn't really want to use Win as an example, if he were to take a human or elven wife, there was still the possibility of them having children together, but their chances were much lower than for two humans or two elves.

However, if he were to marry a dwarf or a beastfolk, the chance of them producing offspring would be almost zero. I had never heard of specific cases of half-elves trying to have children among themselves, but judging by the experience of other half-breed races like half-beastfolk, their chances still weren't that good.

But nevertheless, the oni were producing half-oni children with humans. If they produced enough children to have them serve as the bulk of their military, it felt like they operated outside the rules other half-breeds were restricted by. That meant there was a very strong chance that the oni being reproduced were born as humans.

The whole story left me feeling rather apprehensive. Putting aside the unpleasant savagery of their present behavior, I couldn't see the oni increasing in power as leading anywhere positive.

Their current battle was due to a lack of territory. That was kind of inevitable. Even animals fought over territory. Tragedies like these were visible everywhere in the world. The strong used their strength to survive. It was like a law of nature.

However, even if they went to war to secure the territory necessary for them to survive, their usage of half-oni to bolster their ranks was dangerous. That behavior contradicted their apparent motivations, making it seem more like they were fighting just for the sake of fighting. If that was the case, and the oni eventually did conquer all of Fusou, would they even be satisfied?

Though it was entirely speculation on my part, I expected that wouldn't be

the case. They would continue to use the half-oni and humans to increase in number, eventually declaring war on the mainland. If that happened, they would come up against the Ancient Gold Empire.

The empire was enormous. Even the descendants of demons would have a difficult time waging war against them, especially with the five mystics who protected it. But what if, by some chance, the aggression of the oni caused the golden dragon to stir? The ensuing carnage would be beyond imagining. If it was true that the true giants had been the ones to bring the oni to Fusou, then as small as that chance was, their invasion awakening the golden dragon was not beyond the realm of possibility.

Walking along the road, flanked on each side by rice paddies, I looked up at the clouds overhead and sighed. "Saving the world" sounded far too grandiose for my liking, but it was true that I didn't want the world to be put in danger, and these oni seemed poised to do just that. Why had the true giants decided to protect the demons in Fusou?

Of course, all of this was information I had learned from the southern kingdom, and mostly from humans. The oni likely had their own justifications for their actions, though I suspected I'd never get the chance to hear them out. Whether I would end up fighting the oni or not, I had taken quite an interest in the situation in Fusou.

Historically speaking, the practice of abducting people from an enemy nation with the intent of mixing bloodlines was common behavior in human conflicts as well. When tribes in the Great Grasslands went to war, they would slaughter the warriors of the opposing tribe, then assimilate the women and children into their own. Without a warrior class to protect them, they would have no chance of surviving on the grasslands, so this assimilation was the only way for the defeated to stay alive. How that all made you feel was another question entirely, of course.

Even beyond the grasslands, when one kingdom conquered another, though it took a few generations, their bloodlines would eventually mix and become indistinguishable. There were some cases where the ethnic groups would find ways to remain separate, but it was quite common for them to assimilate. As savage as the oni's methods were, when one considered they were humans

too, there wasn't really a place for an outsider like me to judge them.

"So, what do I do now?" I muttered to myself, struggling to organize my thoughts. I was traveling alone on an open country road, so there was no one around to answer my question.

If the oni lived in the mountains, I could change the landscape to seal them in. But without knowing how strong the oni were, I couldn't be sure a natural barrier like that would be sufficient.

What about splitting the island in two, separating the kingdoms? I could put enough physical distance between them that they wouldn't be able to attack each other. Luckily, the island of Fusou was long, thin, and separated from any other land by a long stretch of ocean. It would be quite a feat, but with the help of the earth and water spirits, it might be possible. My experience with the golden dragon had left me with a stronger connection to the spirits, and I felt capable of drawing out much more of their power than before.

Of course, such a large-scale endeavor was incredibly dangerous, and I had never tried anything close to that scale before. But realistically speaking, something like that would cause terrible damage to the people of Fusou. The shaking of the earthquake I had caused in Ludoria would be like a gentle bump in comparison, and the ensuing tsunami would be immense.

The merfolk city in the ocean would be completely destroyed, and while it might distance the oni from the southern kingdom, I doubted either kingdom would survive the process.

A straightforward battle seemed like the easiest solution. I didn't want to fight or kill the oni in the least, but I couldn't just leave them be. It was quite the dilemma.

The war in Fusou had been going on since long before I arrived, and nothing about the present situation was abnormally dangerous, so maybe I didn't need to let my imagination run wild like this. At this point, there was no reason for an outsider like me to get involved.

But after my meeting with the golden dragon, the world around me looked so much more fragile, leaving me feeling unnecessarily worried. Even so, I

understood that if I made the wrong move because of that worry, the consequences would make the disasters wrought by the oni pale in comparison.



I traveled along the road for two weeks, stopping in villages only long enough to spend the night, until finally it brought me to Outo, the capital of Fusou. Although, since the oni in the north also called their kingdom by the same name, I should say I arrived in the capital of the southern kingdom.

The frontline city of Chinju was another week away on foot, and from a good vantage point, I could just barely make out the enormous Fusou Tree in the distance.

“It’s not just a mountain, is it?”

Even from this far away, or perhaps more accurately *because* it was this far away, you could really see how unnaturally tall it was. The sight had me tilting my head in confusion. Large mountains could reach up to the clouds, but this tree easily stretched far past them.

It was clearly far larger than any normal plant could grow. Its size alone lent credibility to the story that it had been planted by the true giants. And it wasn’t just the height; it had an ample width to support it as well.

According to what I had heard, water flowed out from the center of the Fusou Tree, creating a large lake around its roots. That lake broke off into rivers that flowed north and south, stretching across the island. The Fusou Tree was more than a symbolic feature of the land here. It was inextricably tied to the lives of everyone on the island. I wondered if the purpose of the tree was to gather moisture from above the clouds and bring it down to the surface.

It was also clearly something close to the Spirit Trees and Mystic Trees I already knew. I had plenty of questions...but I supposed they would have to wait until I could ask the tree directly. No matter how big the Fusou Tree was, it was still a plant, which meant it would still talk with me. If it had been protecting the island of Fusou for that long, it might even know what the true giants had been thinking when they planted it.

It would take some time to get those answers, though. After seeing it, I had

no small desire to rush straight there, but I needed to head into the capital first. There were plenty of things I wanted to see here in the center of the southern kingdom.

Looking up, I could see a number of people flitting through the air on their own wings. Yes, there were skyfolk here. Wearing clothes similar to those of mountain monks, they reminded me of the tengu of Japanese mythology.

Living primarily in the eastern city of Tendake, they were said to be a brave and valorous people, playing a key role in resisting the oni advance from the north. Their specialty was apparently in forming up ranks in the sky, then making coordinated attacks on enemy positions by swooping down and letting loose a barrage of short throwing spears. It was a tactic that had driven the oni back time and time again. Besides that, their ability to travel quickly between the capital and Chinju meant the rearguard always knew what was happening on the front lines, enabling them to provide optimal support. Without the skyfolk, the oni would have likely overrun the southern kingdom long ago.

I had traveled through the entire eastern half of the continent, but the races I met here all seemed unique. The merfolk lived in the sea, and the skyfolk, though they lived on land, flew through the sky. They operated in entirely different domains, but respected each other's territory, acknowledged each other as equals, and cooperated toward a single end.

Of course, that was all possible because they shared a common enemy in the oni, but they hadn't just made an alliance. The three races had integrated their societies entirely. Something incredible must have happened to get them to cooperate, and I could only imagine what it took to maintain it. Now that I was in the capital, I was excited to research just what had led to that choice being made, and the history of how these three races respected each other.

For example, in order to allow merfolk to reach the city, large channels had to be built to connect it to the sea. Inns and other important facilities needed rooftop access for the skyfolk to come and go. Rice grown in the southern region of the kingdom and brought to Outo needed to be transported not just to the front lines, but also to the eastward city of Tendake. When ships went out to sea, they would need to account for the population of merfolk who lived

there...and so on and so on.

The currency used in Fusou was made up of small sticks of gold, silver, and copper. I had never seen money like this before, so I imagined it was designed this way out of consideration for either the skyfolk or the merfolk. I didn't know the exact reason, but it was far from the only strange thing I noticed while looking around the city.

As obvious as these differences were, unlike cities in other nations, I couldn't get a good grasp on the history of this place just by looking around. Usually, I could just sit down at any bar, and a few free drinks would be more than enough to get people in a talkative mood.

But in this case, that kind of information wasn't nearly enough to sate my curiosity. In order to develop such smooth cooperation between these three races, there must have been some foundation that had made it necessary, a trigger that caused them to take the plunge, and a long history of trial and error as they worked things out. Success had to be built on top of numerous failures, and each of those failures had their own circumstances. I wasn't just interested in learning about the success, but about all the failed attempts that had led to it.

I knew people of many different races, and my own adopted son was half-elf, half-human. A society that managed to create harmony between entirely different races was extremely relevant to my interests. Of course, I was well aware that the successes they had here wouldn't necessarily be compatible with other places and cultures. Even I wasn't *that* optimistic. But if I could learn what they had done to make things work out here, that knowledge would surely prove useful to me in the future, as long as I continued to live as I did. Even if, for example, the only way to make people of different races join hands like this was to present them with a powerful shared enemy.



The city of Outo, southern capital of the Far East island nation of Fusou, held many sights that demanded seeing beyond just the cooperation of three disparate races. The architecture here was similar to, yet distinct from, that of the Ancient Gold Empire, and the same went for their weaponry. There were

numerous dojos teaching martial arts, the sight of which brought back plenty of memories of the Yosogi dojo. However, the weapons they used were not like the sword I had at my hip. They were proper katana, as well as several variations.

Now that I thought about it, my master in blacksmithing, Oswald, had taught me once how to make a katana. They were weapons from a far distant kingdom, so he hadn't devoted much time to teaching it, but how had he known how to make them in the first place? He had taught me about a weapon unique to this Far East island country, but nothing about the weapons of its neighbor, the Ancient Gold Empire. That was a curious decision. Were the dwarves somehow connected to the Yosogi School's arrival in Ludoria? Maybe when I returned to the mainland, I'd pay him a visit and ask.

Besides the dojos teaching the katana, there were many that specialized in spears, bows, and other long weapons, each active and full of students. Normally, schools like this would be wary of spies coming to steal their secrets, but perhaps because of their proximity to the front lines, they were all happy to welcome any observers. "If you plan on going to the front lines, come learn here so that you'll survive and make a name for yourself," they all declared.

Time flew by as I walked around watching them train, and before I knew it, I had spent a full week in Outo. Unfortunately, none of the schools I observed seemed to have much in common with the Yosogi school.

"Hey, glad to see you here again, Mr. Pointy Ears," someone called out to me as I passed through the curtain leading into the restaurant. A man I had met three days ago, Old Gon, was beckoning me over to his table. He had regaled me with all sorts of stories about the history of Fusou while we enjoyed our drinks...and while the content of his stories was another matter, his bold storytelling was entertaining enough that I had come back to listen every day. He was a human, already in his seventies, but still indulged himself in food and drink like a man half his age.

After asking a waitress for two orders of food and drink, I sat down across from him. "Hey, Old Gon. I'm back to hear more stories. And I guess we might as well eat while we're here."

Gon laughed, stroking his short white beard. Judging by his good mood, it seemed he was already quite deep into the alcohol. That said, I had only known him for three days, so it wasn't like I had ever seen him in a bad mood.

The waitress wasted no time in bringing out our drinks and some snacks, so I added an order of fish on top of them. Thanks to the channels that allowed merfolk access to the capital, seafood was surprisingly cheap here. The grilled fish would go great with some rice...but today I had *sake*, so I decided to pass.

Popping some of the pickled vegetables in front of me into my mouth, I enjoyed the nice crunch before following them up with a mouthful of *sake*. Old Gon then reached out his glass, so I poured more drink for him.

For a time, we sat together quietly enjoying the food and drink. Well, we didn't speak a word, but the crunching of the pickles made it anything but quiet. There was nothing wrong with talking while we drank, but I wanted to enjoy wetting my whistle a bit first, and Old Gon was all too happy to join me. He ate with gusto, but there was nothing rude or coarse in his manners, so sharing a table with him was always a pleasant experience.

Before long, the grilled fish came along, so I got to work taking off its head and removing the bones.

"You're pretty good at using those chopsticks, aren't you? I was thinking the same thing yesterday too," Old Gon said as I dismantled the fish in front of him. Well, I suppose seeing a foreigner like me be so adept at taking a fish apart with chopsticks would be rather surprising.

"Ah, well. At the school where I learned my swordsmanship, we always ate with chopsticks. I also spent a few years living in the Ancient Gold Empire." My knowledge of how to do this actually came from my past life, but for now this explanation was easier. I doubted he'd believe me if I told him the truth, and it wouldn't make much difference if he did.

Old Gon gave me a veiled expression, sharing nothing of how he liked my answer, as he nodded. "Eh, whatever. You learned swordsmanship, did you? You do look quite skilled."

As he took another drink, I started eating the fish with a smile. As much as he called me skilled, I could tell he had some talent himself. Though of course, it

was nothing compared to Wanggui Xuannu in the empire, every casual movement Old Gon made seemed precise and calculated, leaving no openings.

He had told me many a drunk story of his exploits on the battlefield, and I doubted there were any lies among them. Well okay, he had been drunk while telling them, so there was probably at least a little exaggeration.

Judging by the way he carried himself, I suspected he fought with a spear rather than a sword or bow. Whether he could still do so—at an age beyond the average life span of humans in this world—was another question. I got the impression that he'd whirl a spear around like it was nothing...and that even a light pole would be sufficiently deadly in his hands.

"You wanted to learn about the history of Fusou, right?" About halfway through my meal, Old Gon seemed to decide it was time to start talking. Nodding to his question, I refilled his glass, which he emptied again immediately with a satisfied laugh. "All right then. I should introduce you to my friend. She started staying at my place just last night. She's one of you long-lived folk, so you can talk all you like about the old days with her," he said.

Here in Fusou, assuming you weren't talking about the oni, there was only one long-lived species. Humans here lived to about the same age as humans everywhere, while the skyfolk actually matured much quicker, only living to about forty years. That left only one candidate: the merfolk.

The merfolk had long enough life spans that many people believed they were simply immortal. According to the mystics in the Ancient Gold Empire, they typically lived up to four or five centuries. My first impression had been "Oh, so they don't live that long at all," but of course, that was only in comparison to elves and high elves. Even for long-lived species, five hundred years was actually one of the higher life spans.

If a merfolk was well educated, there was a good chance they would know a lot about what I wanted to learn. Even if they didn't know much about history, there were plenty of other topics I'd love to discuss with them. From the underwater city of Shin to their culture around food, I had a mountain of questions to ask.

Finishing off the fish while Old Gon finished his drink, we cleared the bill and

left the restaurant behind. I had only barely started to fill my stomach, but curiosity for what lay ahead drove me onward.



While Outo was technically the southern capital of Fusou, it mostly served as a connection point between Sunsea Harbor, Tendake, Shin, and Chinju. As such, a large road ran straight through the heart of the city, extending north and south. Another road stretched off to the east, which was used to carry supplies to Tendake. In contrast, rather than roads, there were channels and canals built to the west, connecting Outo to the sea. This led to the skyfolk occupying the eastern part of the city, the merfolk occupying the west, and the humans taking the space between them.

Although we just finished dinner, it was already well into the night, with a beautiful moon gracing the dark sky above us. Old Gon brought me to a mansion on the western side of the city...or more accurately, a dojo. I had wondered if he had connections to one, being as strong as he was. He was a bit old to be the head of the school, so he had probably been either the previous head or the one before that. I was a little surprised someone like that would be casually drinking around town.

“You don’t seem all that surprised. That’s no fun.”

I nodded to Gon’s bored look. I mean, I had spent a long time living at a dojo myself. Being led to one like this certainly brought out some nostalgic feelings, but it wouldn’t shock me.

A sign out front proudly declared the name “Rasen Spearmanship.” While that piqued my interest as well, I was first interested in meeting this merfolk. Seeing my impatience, Old Gon made a big show of guiding me inside. What he guided me to was not the dojo itself, but a large pond in the inner courtyard.

Sitting on a rock protruding from the water was a woman, staring up at the moon. Where one would expect legs, her lower body was fused into a single piece, covered in scales. She was a merfolk, clear as day. Young, beautiful, and incredibly captivating. Old Gon had said that she would know a lot about the past, but she didn’t give the impression of an old-timer at all.

“The pond here is connected to the waterways through the bottom, so

merfolk can swim right in. Hey, Mizuyo, I'm home!"

In sharp contrast to Old Gon's bright and cheerful demeanor, the woman called Mizuyo turned around with a distinctly displeased expression. It felt a little unfair how beautiful she was even while making that face. I knew plenty of elves and high elves with beautiful faces, so seeing people like that wasn't especially moving. But the alluring, sensual beauty of this merfolk woman was something else entirely.

Without so much as a splash, she slipped into the water, swimming over to sit on the edge of the pond beside us. She moved through the water as effortlessly as if it were air. "You're late, Gonzou. Your duty as host is to take care of your guests. How could you go out drinking on your own while I'm here?"

Even her voice was enchanting. All of the merfolk I had seen pulling boats in Sunsea Harbor were men, but thinking back on it, they had been pretty good-looking too. However, the fact that none of them had left a lasting impression on me meant that Mizuyo was probably special, even among merfolk.

"Hey, I'm not the master of this dojo anymore. That logic won't work on me. Besides, you wouldn't go drinking with me if I asked, and you wouldn't let me have any if you did. That's why I had to hang out with this pointy-eared guy instead." Old Gon didn't show even a hint of remorse.

That rough introduction was a bit of a problem, though. After giving her a short bow, I pointed her back to Old Gon. If he was hoping I'd bail him out, he was out of luck. I was more than happy to wait out their little spat.

Mizuyo caught my meaning immediately, turning back to scold Old Gon. After a while, he finally started to realize he was fighting a losing battle, and so turned to me.

"Oh, you're staying the night, aren't you? I'll go get a room ready for you, so please keep Mizuyo company for me for a bit." With that quick excuse, he left us behind.

His departure was so abrupt that, despite having just met, Mizuyo and I could only share a look and laugh. The way he fled was just like an old man being chastised by his kids.



“That Gonzou is really hopeless. Let me introduce myself again. I’m sure you figured it out by now, but my name is Mizuyo. But you...you’re not just any forestfolk, are you? The water seems excited just to be near you.”

I had heard that merfolk could manipulate the flow of water, but her statement still surprised me. It seemed she could also tell how the water was feeling, or rather, how the spirits that inhabited it felt. But being a merfolk, she likely couldn’t see the spirits, so she could only interpret it as the feelings of the water itself.

That small difference in perception was quite interesting to me. If I told her about the spirits and how to communicate with them, would her ability to control water improve? Or were her abilities to manipulate water entirely unrelated to the spirits, so it would have no effect at all? That result would give me all sorts of room to speculate on the nature of her abilities. I almost wanted to start experimenting.

“I suppose you’re right. My name’s Acer. I’m often called a forestfolk, or an elf where I live, but actually I’m a high elf. There’s not much difference between how we live, but we’re closer to the spirits.”

Mizuyo nodded at my introduction, not the least bit surprised. This was how I met Mizuyo, the woman who would teach me the history of Fusou.



Before the arrival of the oni, humans, merfolk, and skyfolk lived together in the land of Fusou. They lived separately back then, so there was much more distance between them. But there had always been stories of humans lost in the mountains being guided back to safety by skyfolk, or humans falling in love with merfolk who accidentally found themselves caught in fishing nets.

But as the three races began to grow closer, a problem arose: half-bloods started to be born among them. Though it was not easy for members of different races to have children together, it was not impossible.

Of course, the children themselves weren’t the problem, but the different ways of life among the three races meant their differences in raising children started to become a problem. My adopted son, Win, had the ability to see the

spirits, and was better able to rely on their help than most elves, but he was lucky. As far as I knew, all elves could see the spirits, but that wasn't the case for half-elves. It seemed about half—or potentially even more—couldn't see the spirits at all.

Half-bloods born between humans, merfolk, and skyfolk would face similar difficulties...or even many more, due to the huge differences in the ways they lived. Half-bloods born between humans and merfolk typically had the fused lower body of the merfolk, meaning they had the same difficulty as other merfolk when it came to operating on land. However, only about half of them could control water or even breathe underwater like other merfolk. They could not live on the land with humans nor in underwater cities with merfolk, driving them out of both societies.

Half-skyfolk developed wings in all sizes, but at least those incapable of flight could still live on the surface without issue. On top of that, the difference between human and skyfolk life spans wasn't especially large, so half-skyfolk didn't have to worry much about that disparity.

The one advantage that half-merfolk had was the love merfolk had for their own people, including the half-bloods among them. Half-merfolk could only live in shallow waters and needed human help to survive. This had led to the merfolk as a whole growing closer with humans, in order to secure the help they needed to support these half-bloods. The difference in their ways of life and life expectancies were both huge problems for them, but those challenges had ultimately helped to unite the merfolk and human societies.

The humans found the merfolk's beauty and longevity alluring, but they also understood that if their fishing activities angered the merfolk, they would sink all the humans' ships. Though their domains were entirely different, they couldn't survive in conflict with each other. Not everything worked out pleasantly; nevertheless, a number of villages populated by half-merfolk and humans had sprung up along the coast. In other words, the groundwork for large-scale cooperation between the two races had already been laid. The destruction of these coastal villages was what had ultimately led to the cooperation of the merfolk, humans, and skyfolk against the oni.

The existence of the oni hadn't been widespread knowledge at first. They lived primarily in the north, where harsh mountainous terrain kept humans from exploring. There had been some human villages in the area, and even a country that united them, but intercommunication hadn't been particularly strong. Most of the land was actually controlled by small skyfolk villages, who had yet to gather into larger communities. There had been some sightings of oni in the past, but they had been thought of as bizarre monsters rather than a race of people.

The other three races didn't come to understand the strength the oni possessed until a number of the northern kingdoms had been conquered. But even then, they had only been recognized as monsters lurking in the mountains, so the divided human kingdoms had made no effort to deal with them.

The first ones to prepare for a proper war against the oni were the skyfolk after several of their northern cities had fallen. However, even back then, the armies of the oni had been reinforced by half-oni and could overwhelm the skyfolk with sheer numbers. The survivors gathered in the largest of the skyfolk settlements, the city of Tendake, and began to strategize. With their short life spans, which was in some ways an advantage, they could produce children and raise them into warriors quickly.

The defeat of the skyfolk had sent a wave of terror through the human kingdoms. These oni were no mere monsters. They were an unknown threat that was highly intelligent and extremely powerful, and most horrifying of all, they used humans to propagate and bolster their own ranks. The ensuing chaos led to the fall of even the larger northern human kingdoms, greatly expanding the territory of the oni. That was when the coastal villages were attacked and the half-merfolk were wiped out.

If the three races had banded together at that point, the aggression of the oni might have been checked. But even the humans were still settled between disparate, disjointed kingdoms, making such cooperation impossible. They weren't able to truly unite until a hero was born.

That hero's name was Takato. He had been a half-skyfolk, said to have particularly small wings that left him incapable of flight. However, his wings were small enough that they didn't get in the way whenever he fought

alongside the humans on land. Heading to the battlefield at a young age, he survived long despite being physically weaker than his enemies.

Together with his comrades in arms, he toppled the great oni responsible for conquering the northern kingdoms, though at no small cost. Unsatisfied with his fame, he used his hard-earned reputation to gather the other skyfolk to his cause.

Despite this victory, it wouldn't be long before the oni had overrun the entirety of Fusou. The humans were able to flee to the mainland and find a new home among others of the same race. The merfolk could flee into the sea, finding anywhere they liked to be their new home; there was nothing that bound them there, and there were plenty of merfolk who lived outside of Fusou already. But the skyfolk had nowhere to run. If they lost Fusou, they lost everything. They had to join forces with the other races and fight.

Takato had then gone to the merfolk. While the merfolk had great power underwater, the oni lived on land, often among the mountains. No matter what the merfolk did, their hatred of the oni would never be answered. At this rate, the oni would simply ignore the existence of the merfolk and take all of Fusou for themselves. The merfolk had no choice but to unite with the other races in fighting the oni.

Finally, with the skyfolk and merfolk behind him, Takato approached the human kingdoms and forced them to dissolve and reunite as one. They then developed strategies that allowed the skyfolk and humans to fight in concert while mobilizing the merfolk for logistics. It completely turned the tide of the war. They also created a new code of laws to reduce friction between the three races, giving birth to a united kingdom of Fusou to stand against the oni.

Skilled in both the literary and military arts, Takato was lauded as a hero for his achievements, but that couldn't change the reality of his being half-skyfolk—and the short life span that came with it. With no children of his own, he spent his later years writing laws and educating the people as well as delegating authority throughout the kingdom so as to prevent a war of succession after his death. These pursuits drew him away from the front lines, turning the war into a quagmire that saw no conclusion in his lifetime.

To summarize it all, the land of Fusou was originally a land populated by three races who lived amicably but separately. That had laid the groundwork for a half-blooded hero to unite them under a single flag when a powerful enemy threatened them all. When that hero finally passed away, the war settled into a deadlock.

I had thought the southern kingdom had been slowly driven back over time, leading them to where they were today, but if the current front line at Chinju had been established by Takato himself, then his arrival had brought them up to where they could fight on an equal footing with the oni.

The current kingdom of Fusou now existed in a precarious state of balance, all to resist the oni advance. Precarious enough that even the slightest interference threatened to topple everything.



“Oh, it looks...it looks... Okay no, it doesn’t look that great on you.” After a bit of hesitation, Old Gon finally gave me his honest opinion.

I was currently wearing a traditional kimono used by the people in Fusou, rather than my ordinary clothes. It looked to me like the traditional summer clothing of Japan. The shorter sleeves and legs gave it great ventilation, and together with the hemp fabric made it quite cool. It was the kind of clothing that made things as simple as napping on a tatami floor or sitting on the porch and watching the moon at night look fun.

Five days had passed since I’d started staying at Old Gon’s house. Or rather, his dojo. My conversation with Mizuyo wasn’t one I’d be able to finish in a day or two. When I asked if I could come back to talk with her again, Old Gon was quick to insist:

“Don’t be dumb, just stay here. We’ve got that empty guest room anyway. But in exchange, you’ll have to spend some time drinking with me too.”

And so, I ended up staying here.

It seemed my clothing looked quite hot and stuffy to a native of Fusou. The day before, he had told me I should wear the local clothing while I was in Fusou and gave me these. I had worn similar things while living at Kaeha’s dojo, so I

was already a little familiar with them.

Unfortunately, it seemed they didn't suit me very well. But as long as I was in the dojo, it didn't really matter how they looked on me, and they were comfortable enough that I was happy to wear them regardless. If I had to go out, I could just put a bit more thought into my outfit.

"You've really taken a liking to Mizuyo's stories, huh?" Old Gon asked me out of the blue, while practicing with a staff out in the courtyard.

Of course—her stories were quite intriguing. She was well learned, her delivery was careful and polite, and she had a beautiful voice. It would be exhausting for her to have to talk at great length, so I only bothered her at night when it was cooler. Thanks to her efforts, I was starting to get a vague picture of how the kingdom of Fusou had come together. During the day, I spent my time practicing together with Old Gon or visiting the dojos around town in search of clues about the Yosogi School, but I really looked forward to nighttime the most.

"I see. Glad to hear it. Then since you're my guest and all, let me tell you an interesting story of my own."

With a mischievous grin, Old Gon leaned his staff against the wall and sat down on the edge of the porch. My curiosity piqued, I took a seat beside him.

"This dojo probably seems like it'll let anyone in, right? I guess if you've been looking around, most of the dojos in Outo probably seem that way."

That was true. Of all the dojos I had visited, none gave the impression of trying to keep themselves exclusive. I figured that was because they were desperate to raise as many strong warriors as possible to fight against the oni.

"The old schools of Fusou weren't always like that, though. Before the war with the oni started, humans and skyfolk sometimes fought, but mostly there were wars between the human kingdoms."

It was a story from long, long before he had been born. He spoke as if recounting an old memory, though it was of a time he had never witnessed. I listened quietly.

“But Fusou was much smaller than the mainland. Even a war between countries was a pretty small conflict. A battle between a few dozen or a few hundred people was enough to call it a war.”

I was starting to get the picture Old Gon was trying to paint for me. He was probably trying to tell me something about the Yosogi School.

“Martial arts schools held enough sway back then that they could influence the outcomes of those wars. Great care was taken to ensure that not a single technique from the schools was made known to foreign enemies. Of course, that was all before the oni showed up and the human kingdoms united.”

The smaller the scale of the conflicts, the more a single individual’s prowess could influence the result. Keeping one’s skills a secret was only natural in such a situation. In that case...

Old Gon continued. “Basically, many of the schools in Fusou that were wiped out took their secrets to the grave with them. I know a good deal about every martial arts school in Fusou, be it swordsmanship, spearmanship, or unarmed combat. Among all of those, I’ve never heard of any Yosogi school, nor seen any school with techniques like the ones you showed me,” he declared.

The ancestor school of the Yosogi style was gone. Well, it was a possibility I had always considered, and I had started to suspect that was the case after my time visiting the dojos around town. But having the reality of it set before me was still depressing.

Seeing me deflate, Old Gon’s grin only grew more mischievous. “I’ve never heard of any *school* with the Yosogi name, that is. I have heard the name somewhere else, though I have no idea if it’s related to what you’re looking for.”

I couldn’t help but scowl at the teasing introduction he was giving me, even though I knew my expression was only a reward for a prankster like him.

“Ah ha ha, sorry, sorry. Do you want to hear about it, then? A story from before Fusou was united, of a woman who fought tooth and nail against the oni, Yuzuriha Yosogi. This is the actual story I wanted to tell you.”

Putting a hand to his chest, Old Gon started speaking in a stronger voice than

before. The story of a single swordswoman, unknown to most in history.



The day after I heard Old Gon's story, I asked him to introduce me to a swordsmith. I wanted to bring a katana back to the current Yosogi School, the inheritors of Yuzuriha Yosogi's legacy.

Technically speaking, the Yosogi School wasn't literally descended from her. Kaeha and her children weren't descendants of Yuzuriha Yosogi, but her younger brother. Also, the current Yosogi School used a long straight sword—a weapon quite different from a katana—and had developed techniques with that in mind. I used to think that presenting them with a katana might just sow confusion.

But now I realized that the change in their weapon of choice meant there must be some techniques that had been lost. They could choose which they would use themselves.

When the Yosogi School first put down roots in Ludoria, they had given up the katana in favor of the straight sword because that was the weapon they could get their hands on. Now, things were different. If I learned how to make katana from the swordsmiths here and then brought that knowledge back to the smiths in Ludoria, the Yosogi School would be able to use them again. They would have the option to choose.

Beyond that, understanding the differences between the two types of swords might lead to the creation of new techniques. Or perhaps I should say it *would* lead to it. This was the Yosogi School, after all.

Though he hesitated at first, Old Gon eventually introduced me to an old smith named Sakuji. He was younger than Old Gon, yet still old enough that he could have retired from blacksmithing years ago. Even so, he still worked in the forge, focused mainly on teaching new students.

At first, Sakuji—or Old Saku—seemed reluctant to suddenly take on a new student who was not only a foreigner, but also a member of a race he had never seen before. However, when he learned I was an accomplished smith on the mainland, his attitude completely changed. After all, I had spent just as

many years in the forge as he had, even though a great deal of it had been done while traveling. I was plenty confident in the skills my decades of experience had developed.

So instead of taking me on as a student, Old Saku declared I was to be his guest. In exchange for teaching me how the smiths in Fusou worked, he wanted me to show him the techniques from the mainland. It was an exchange of knowledge. I was a little bit surprised by the request, but it was an intriguing idea that worked perfectly into my plans.

Normally, one would expect something like the production of katana to be a closely guarded secret. But instead of being kicked out the door, I was invited in to trade skills. It seemed the attitude of cooperation fostered by their war against the oni had become deeply ingrained in the culture of Fusou. It's kind of a weird way of putting it, but it was like the war had driven the kingdom into a state of open-minded acceptance.

A new student learning to make swords would need to spend at least five years learning the basics, and would begin work as a mere assistant. However, since I was here on the pretense of an exchange of knowledge and not as a student, and because I was already a skilled smith—albeit in a different style of blacksmithing than they were used to—we immediately moved to teaching.

I imagined it was quite an aggravating sight to the other students in the forge, but after declaring me his guest, they were quite polite and sincere with me—and dare I say, avaricious. Every minute Old Saku spent teaching me, and every second I spent showing him the techniques used on the mainland, they were crowded around as close as they could get without interfering, absorbing every scrap of knowledge they could get their hands on.

Humans were wont to lose themselves in greed, forgetting how to live in harmony with others and bringing harm to those around them. But that greed could also serve to drive them ever onward and upward. Of course, humans weren't the only ones who acted this way, but it was one of the striking traits of their race. It's one of the things I liked most about them.

The material they used to make swords here was a steel forged from iron

sand. Old Saku began by teaching me how to make it, as well as how to determine the quality of the steel produced.

Both harder and softer steels had their uses. The shell steel that would make up the blade's edge would need to be hard, while the core of the weapon needed to be soft. He taught me how they layered the steel, and how they heated it while they were forging. They made use of the ashes of burnt straw and even mud. The next step was folding the steel over. The harder shell steel was then wrapped around the softer core steel and forged together. Finally, the blade is cooled, with the blunt edge insulated more to make the sharp edge expand faster and create a curved shape. There was a lot of overlap between their techniques and mine, but in the same vein, there were many points that were totally different.

As I learned about swordsmithing from Old Saku, I reached a conclusion about a previous question I'd had. The techniques Oswald taught me to make katana had likely come from the dwarves who had analyzed a completed weapon and tried to reproduce it themselves. That was the impression I got now that I knew how both sides operated.

Though it was just speculation on my part, I wondered if the fleeing students of the Yosogi School had made contact with the dwarves in Ludoria and asked them for help setting down roots there. In exchange for their services, they could have provided some of their own katana as gifts to them. The ancestors of the Yosogi School were swordsmen, not blacksmiths, so even if they had possessed swords of their own, they would have had no knowledge of how to actually make them.

The dwarves would have had to reverse engineer the creation of the katana...and it seemed like they hadn't fully succeeded. That thought was exciting to me. As old a story as it was, that meant here in the Far East, I was now learning the unique skills needed to craft these weapons that those old dwarves sought, but could never attain. I could only imagine the frustration on Oswald's face when he'd hear about this.

I would have to learn the methods used here absolutely perfectly in preparation for that day. Just remembering wasn't enough. I needed to break it down, swallow, and digest it, making it into a skill of my own.



In that era, the land of Fusou was divided into many kingdoms, and even the human kingdoms were constantly at war with each other. Yuzuriha Yosogi was born into one such kingdom named Hakumei. Though born a woman, she nevertheless pursued the path of the sword. The head of their school was old and sick, so she took his place, protecting and developing the school until her younger brother was old enough to take the headship.

That story already seemed to contradict what I knew of the modern Yosogi School, a sign of the archaic values held by these past people. That said, I was in no position to judge them. I had no doubt they were simply doing everything necessary to protect what was important to them, and to pass on what they knew to future generations.

One day, one of Hakumei's neighboring kingdoms was destroyed by the oni. They learned of their neighbor's fate through the tales of survivors who had fled from the carnage. Thus the Kingdom of Hakumei learned of the oni threat, and understood that war would come to them in no time.

Hakumei was at a disadvantage for being much smaller than its neighbors, though perhaps that was for the best. It had only managed to maintain its independence due to the efforts of a small group of skilled swordsmen, members of the same school of swordsmanship as Yuzuriha Yosogi. It was clear that if their neighbors couldn't stand against the oni, Hakumei had no chance against them either.

And so the king of Hakumei—or as they were titled in Fusou, the Lord—decided that rather than waste the lives of his people in an unwinnable war, he would flee the kingdom altogether and find safety in foreign lands.

It must have been a bitter decision to make. Abandoning the kingdom his ancestors had built up over generations must have been more painful than any physical torment. The people abandoning the fields where they grew their crops were essentially abandoning their means of living. But nevertheless, that was the decision he made. No matter what hardship the future would bring upon them, it was better than filling the gut of an oni.

However, despite the people's resolve to flee, the pursuing oni would be

faster. And so the Lord commanded the swordsmen of the kingdom to remain behind with him so as to delay the oni advance for as long as possible. Of course, having inherited the headship of her school, Yuzuriha Yosogi was no exception.

It was said her ailing father told her, “I will resume my post as head of the school. Take your brother and flee south.”

But in reply, Yuzuriha Yosogi shook her head. “No matter what form it takes, should I flee this battlefield, our school will forever be known for cowardice. I cannot lay such a burden on my brother’s shoulders. Moreover, you are too old and weak to serve as the head.” It was a decision made out of her pride, but also out of her love for her family.

In truth, Yuzuriha Yosogi was not the most powerful member of her school. Though her knowledge of technique was superb, her physique and stature meant she often fell behind the other swordsmen. But even so, she was the head of the school. When her younger brother cried, saying he couldn’t leave her behind, she admonished him with a hug.

“If you would stay for my sake, then live on and protect the school for me instead. Survive, grow, and teach the next generation. That is my wish. You cannot cry anymore, for the moment I die, you will become the head.”

In the face of her unwavering resolve, her acceptance of her own inevitable death, her brother had no recourse but to do as she said.

A few days later, as they had predicted, the oni arrived and turned Hakumei into a war zone. Yuzuriha Yosogi stood with dignity, her resolve born equally of pride and love. To buy time for the fleeing people of Hakumei, and of course to protect her younger brother and the future of their school. Having accepted her own death as inevitable, her sword and her spirit became unrivaled.

But the oni were a powerful foe. Though she cut down many of them, the swordsmen fighting alongside her fell one by one. It would only be a matter of time before they were wiped out.

In that moment of fear, Yuzuriha strode through the front lines, literally cutting open a path through the enemy forces to reach the great oni leading

them. Having expected a one-sided slaughter, the great oni had grown frustrated at their lack of progress and so arrived himself to crush the resistance.

He was an overwhelming obstacle...but presented an incredible opportunity. Though it looked like they had no choice but to be slowly ground into the dust, a chance to strike at the leader of the oni had presented itself. The great oni was much larger than his soldiers, and in the same way was much more powerful. He had likely inherited much of the strength of his demonic ancestors.

Against that peerless warrior, Yuzuriha Yosogi stood alone. She was well experienced in fighting opponents who were physically superior to her. For this foe as well, she would be crushed in an instant if she only tried to overpower him with a head-on approach.

A simple distraction wouldn't work. Half-hearted efforts would simply be blown away. In order to penetrate the resilient flesh of her opponent, she would need to use his own strength against him. If she showed even the slightest hint of hesitation, he would pounce and end her life. If she attacked recklessly, he would easily cut her down.

But she fought—without fear and without impatience, wringing every drop of strength from her body. As the last of her strength ran dry, the great oni's fist struck and took her life. But in that same moment, her sword pierced his chest.

It was not enough to fell the great oni, but it was enough to make the oni's leader withdraw his troops. Had that instant of pain inspired fear in the great oni, or respect? There was no way of knowing, but it drew the oni away from the battlefield, leaving a small number of Hakumei swordsmen as survivors. These survivors were able to spread knowledge of the oni and how they fought to the other kingdoms.

The red-skinned oni were brutish and powerful.

The blue-skinned oni were nimble and agile.

The green-skinned oni were sly and cunning.

The black-skinned oni possessed a skin like armor.

The white-skinned oni possessed the traits of the red, blue, and green oni together.

The tattooed oni, regardless of the color of their skin, were practitioners of the Wicked Arts.

The great oni were leaders, possessing incredible power.

The surviving swordsmen spread the tale of how Yuzuriha Yosogi had driven back the oni advance single-handedly, and gave them the chance to pass on what they had learned about their enemies.

However, in that era, the human kingdoms still warred among themselves. Unable to find a kingdom that would take them in, the people of Hakumei were scattered across Fusou. A small group of them traveled by ship to the mainland.

It took a short time before Yuzuriha's exploits were recognized and honored by the people of Fusou—not until they truly understood the threat that the oni posed.

Today, the name of the school of swordsmanship Yuzuriha had led had been lost to time. But I knew it might have lived on under another name. Perhaps at one time, that school had adopted the name of its kingdom. Now, however, they bestowed themselves with the name Yosogi. They had put down roots far west, flourished, and grown into one of the illustrious Four Great Schools of the Kingdom of Ludoria.

I created this written account so that I might not forget even a single detail of this story, so that I can present perfectly to the descendants of Yuzuriha's younger brother, the people who inherited her legacy, the story of one lone swordswoman.



Once I began regularly visiting the forge, Old Gon immediately decided I'd be staying at his place. Actually, when I said I was going to find another place so I didn't impose on him for too long, he got mad and demanded I stay. So I

learned and taught blacksmithing during the day, and drank with Old Gon and talked with Mizuyo at night under the moon. On days when I couldn't visit the forge, I'd practice together with Old Gon. I had settled into a gentle, relaxing life here.

From time to time, though, I was struck by the realization that this was a kingdom perpetually at war. For example, the time when the equipment we made in the forge was carried off to be shipped to the front lines. When the people training in the dojo left for Chinju. When the wounded from Chinju came back to Outo, unable to continue fighting...though they came back in far fewer numbers than those who left. Old Gon's house was the dojo of the Rasen School of Spearmanship. There were plenty of young people from the school heading up to the front lines.

One day, while Old Gon and I were training side by side, me with my sword and him with a staff standing in for a spear, a bird...no, a skyfolk flew down into the courtyard. His name was Kotarou, and he had jet-black wings like that of a crow. Being only thirteen years old, he was still a child in my eyes, but among the skyfolk he was very much an adult. It wouldn't be long before he left to fight in Chinju himself.

"Yo, Kota." Old Gon stopped his practice and called out to him, so I did likewise.

As a skyfolk, he wasn't an official student of the Rasen School, which focused on teaching spearmanship to humans. The twisting and turning motions used by humans when fighting were all but impossible for the skyfolk with their enormous wings. The skyfolk fought primarily using throwing spears, swooping charge attacks from the sky, or dogfighting in the air, all taught by their own schools of martial arts.

However, a number of skyfolk grew passionate about their martial arts, and deciding there was something to learn from human martial arts, sometimes came to visit the dojo like this. Among those visitors, Kotarou was a particularly agreeable guy, happily answering my questions when I couldn't hold back my curiosity any longer.

“Greetings, Master Gonzou, Sir Acer. My apologies for intruding on your practice,” Kotarou greeted us with a deep bow of his head.

That said, he hadn’t done anything wrong. It was obvious that larger, open areas were preferable for landing to the skyfolk. It wasn’t like they were unable to land in streets or other more restricted spaces, but there was always the possibility of accidents occurring if either they or the passersby below them weren’t paying careful attention. Facilities like inns that were regularly visited by skyfolk would have an access point on the roof for them, but unfortunately the buildings that made up the dojo were all single story, so they couldn’t accommodate something similar. Many of the structures in the city that had air access for the skyfolk were built like castle towers or large pagodas.

In short, a flat, single-story dojo like this was not an ideal place for landing. As such, the best option available to Kotarou was a courtyard like the one we were using. Neither Old Gon nor I were stuck up enough to find fault with him for doing something so natural.

“Not at all, we stopped ’cause we wanted to. Isn’t that right?”



And beyond that, the fact that he was so polite despite being so young was one reason both Old Gon and I had taken a liking to him.

I nodded, waving off Kotarou's concerns.

"You have my gratitude for your forbearance. I will soon be making the trip to Chinju, so I wished to come and say goodbye to the Rasen School. You have all been a great help to me," Kotarou declared proudly, eyes bright and chest puffed. I, on the other hand, was internally gasping.

He was so *young*. I mean, I already knew it wouldn't be long before he was deployed, but still...he was so young.

"Oh, really? Congratulations. Kota, I'm not your master, nor am I the head of this school anymore, so I don't have anything to give you. Instead, let me leave you with some advice." Old Gon, on the other hand, took the news perfectly in stride, congratulating him right away. Ah, it seemed giving a gift to someone heading to the front lines was only proper for someone who was really close to them. If someone like Old Gon or I were to go over the heads of his master or his close relatives and give him something anyway, it would probably be perceived as a little rude. That seemed to be the custom here in Fusou.

"A skyfolk warrior is in the most danger on his first sortie. They tend to get carried away with pride and bloodlust. But nothing is as helpful to us humans as an experienced skyfolk, one who has lived long and felled plenty of oni. Go become a great warrior, Kota. You're more than qualified."

The proud excitement immediately vanished from Kotarou's face, replaced by an earnest and attentive nod. If he was able to take the words of his predecessors so seriously, I had no doubt he'd be a great warrior.

It was just like Old Gon said. All he had to do was survive that first battle. I could only pray that he would. There was nothing I could do for him, not even any words I could give him.

Kotarou left us behind in the courtyard, off to say goodbye to the current head of the Rasen school. Seeing my gaze following him long after he was out of sight, Old Gon poked me with his staff.

“Hey, no need for a face like that. I don’t know how it looks to you, but for us, this is a great honor, and something to be celebrated.” Rather than rebuke me, it felt more like he was trying to convince me.

I was sure he was right. This was a story that you could hear anywhere. Even on the Great Grasslands, Juyal had been sent out on the battlefield at thirteen years old. When you took into account the small but very real difference between the life spans of humans and skyfolk, that age wasn’t too early for Kotarou to be deployed to the front lines either. It was nothing for me to get so sentimental over, especially for someone I only barely knew.

I took a deep breath, then started swinging my sword once again. Today I’d sweat hard and drink harder. I was sure Old Gon was looking for the same thing.



“Hmm. This is...phenomenal.” Though he wasn’t a master to me or anything, my current teacher in the Fusou style of blacksmithing, Old Saku, breathed a sigh of admiration. He was holding a two-handed sword called a flamberge that I had just finished.

Flamberges were rather large swords, and this one was no exception. But despite its significant weight, Old Saku didn’t waver in the slightest as he lifted the blade to inspect it.

“My master taught me that it was a kind of sword born from the image of a flame. The wavelike blade makes it more difficult to stop the bleeding of wounds it inflicts, making it quite deadly too.”

Old Saku nodded at my explanation. A slash from a flamberge meant that, even if the cut wasn’t immediately fatal, it was typically only a matter of time. Even with medical attention, the wounds it inflicted were difficult to treat, quickly leading to infection and sickness that would take the victim’s life.

Yes, the flamberge was a weapon designed specifically to kill people. So its wavelike blade would likely be effective against oni as well.

“What a terrifying trick. Even so...or perhaps because of that, the wave in the blade is quite beautiful. You’ve shown me something incredible here,” he said, bowing deeply to me. He always reacted the same way, showing me the utmost

respect and showering me with praise.

That made me want to share even more with him. Of course, part of that was also because he was teaching me about blacksmithing here in Fusou, particularly how to forge the katana they used.

Our little cultural exchange was proceeding smoothly. I showed him some regular swords and spears as well, but what really captured his interest were unique and unconventional weapons, like this flamberge, halberds, and shotels.

A halberd was at once a spear, a long-handled axe, and a claw ideal for tearing riders from their saddles. A shotel was a sharply curved sword, designed to strike around shields, but was also capable of lightning-fast counterattacks, and the hooklike shape could be used to catch and pull opponents.

I was sure Old Saku was analyzing these unique traits and considering how to incorporate them into local weapon designs. It was very much in keeping with the culture in Fusou as I had learned it.

However, at the same time, it would likely be extremely difficult, far more than it would be for me to learn how to make a katana. Things would be different if he had been younger, but at his age, it would be hard to expect any new project of his to come to fruition before his life span caught up to him.

But even so, every new thing I showed him filled his face with wonder and delight. I imagined he hadn't thought of completing these new weapons himself from the beginning. He wanted to pass down what I taught him to his own students. Even if it took them decades, if they eventually made something useful for their war against the oni, that would be enough. That was why he was trying to draw as much out of me as he could.

He was very different from Old Gon, but still a very strong person in his own way. There were a lot of people like that here in Fusou, and not just among the humans. The same went for the merfolk and skyfolk.

As I started regularly visiting the forge, I came into contact with the other races more frequently. People looking for higher quality weapons were recommended to this forge, much more commonly than people who came to browse. Of course some of those visitors were humans, but merfolk and skyfolk

came too.

I understood when it came to humans and skyfolk, who were fighting the oni directly, but I didn't understand why the merfolk were in need of high-quality weapons. Upon asking them, I learned that while the merfolk did take a more logistical role in the war, they still needed weapons to protect their cargo from monsters that inhabited the sea. That's why they were after good weaponry, they said.

It was kind of a stupid question in hindsight, and fairly rude too, but the merfolk I spoke with were very understanding and helpful. Of course, once I realized how rude I had been, I immediately apologized. But the merfolk had simply laughed, saying there was no point in getting upset over people on land misunderstanding the common sense of the sea, especially since I was willing to learn. They even told me how delicious the meat from sea monsters could be, and how valuable the materials you could harvest from them were.

I also encountered a rather famous warrior among the skyfolk; he was surprisingly sociable as well. As proud and accomplished as he was, it didn't seem to have gone to his head in the least. When I asked him about it, he replied that of course he had full confidence in his abilities, and was quite proud of what he had accomplished, but that didn't mean he could forget to have respect for those around him.

In simple terms, among those living in the cities were quite a few veterans who had served and survived deployments to the war's front lines. Acting arrogant and puffed up in front of people like them would be more embarrassing than anything. Even besides those veterans, the front lines were only able to hold thanks to the support of everybody behind them, so it was impossible to treat them as lesser.

One thing I felt the merfolk and skyfolk had in common was their tolerance and respect for others. I doubted that went for every single member of their races, but at the very least it seemed the merfolk and skyfolk of Fusou, living in cooperation with multiple other races, fostered that attitude among their people.

Maybe that was all because they had a single common foe...but perhaps that

common foe only brought out what was already one of their great strengths.



Under the light of the moon, the merfolk woman sang, as if yearning for the past. No, not “as if.” She most certainly was.

The song Mizuyo was singing was not about the distant past, but about warriors who fought the oni a mere fifty years ago. While fifty years was a generation or two by human standards, it was very different from her perspective.

Long ago, it seemed that there were a number of merfolk children who approached the land of the oni, knowing it was off-limits. The curiosity of the mischievous children occasionally overruled any fear they might have felt. Adults telling them not to go somewhere made them want to visit it all the more. It seemed merfolk children weren’t all that different from human children in that regard.

Breaking this particular rule shouldn’t have been much of a problem. The oni had few ways to capture merfolk who stayed in the water, and the children had no intention of going up on land. They’d go out there, fulfill the terms of the dare, and sneak quietly home. When they became adults, they’d learn of the brutality that was occurring on land. If they helped with transporting goods and personnel for the war, they would learn the sadness of having their human and skyfolk friends never come home. Again, and again, and again.

But unfortunately, this group of children were unlucky. Not only did they encounter an oni on their little adventure, it was one of the tattooed oni, the practitioners of the Wicked Arts. The children were captured by the oni’s spells and brought back to their fortress.

I suspected the Wicked Arts the oni used were the same as the magic that I knew. Oni were descended from demons, people who used mana to transform their bodies. The demons themselves would have likely referred to it as an “evolution,” but either way, they would excel at the use of mana. These Wicked Arts had to at least be related to magic in some way. That meant the tattoos the oni wore might have been similar to the engravings Kawshman and I put on weapons, or the patterns that sages in the Ancient Gold Empire drew on their

paper talismans.

At any rate, when the merfolk discovered that the children who had disappeared had been captured by oni, they immediately panicked. Even if they weren't immediately killed and eaten by the oni, if they were kept out of the water for too long, they would die anyway.

As I mentioned before about the history of Fusou, the bonds between merfolk were incredibly strong. That went even more so for their children. However, they had no way to assault the oni fortress on their own, and an attack by humans or skyfolk would result in countless casualties. No matter how much they wanted to save the children, they couldn't push the price of their own failure onto their land-and sky-based brethren.

The merfolk at large had come to an impasse, but there was one who, unable to bear the loss of her younger brother, went to ask for help and approached a particularly skilled human warrior.

After hearing her story, the warrior replied, "Leave it to me. I'll save your brother."

Without the slightest trace of hesitation, the warrior used his influence to gather allies. The warrior was quite famous for his exploits on the front lines, and had just happened to meet the merfolk woman while fishing on one of his rare breaks. Though they hadn't been saved yet, relief at finding help as well as guilt at the danger she was putting the humans in brought the merfolk woman to tears.

"Hey, killing oni is our job. No need for you to be upset about it. More importantly, please get boats for us."

With a role in the plan given to her, the merfolk woman smiled.

Under cover of darkness, the band of human warriors struck the oni fortress from the sea. Unable to watch the fight herself, the merfolk woman could do nothing but pray for the safety of the warriors and the children they sought to save. However, as brutal as the fighting must have been, eventually the fortress was in flames, and the warriors returned to the sea with the children in tow.

Each and every one of the children had made it back safely...but the same

could not be said for the human warriors. Yet not one of them found fault with the merfolk woman or the children, only celebrating along with her for their safe return.

“Scolding kids isn’t part of our job. Make sure their parents give ’em an earful,” they laughed.

The humans bravely fought and died. Even if they didn’t fall in battle, their life spans were terribly short compared to the merfolk, who at times felt like the members of this race were born one day and then gone the next.

But despite that, this merfolk woman took a deep interest in them. Fighting bravely, strong enough to bear their losses with a smile, these humans were so kind. Strangely enough, the relationship between the merfolk woman and the famous warrior didn’t end there.

I was quite sure it was the tale of Mizuyo and Old Gon. As Mizuyo’s story continued, Old Gon sat a distance away, drinking in the moonlight. Why had Mizuyo told me this story?

I was sure it was something she wanted me to know. As someone who would live even longer than her, she must have wanted me to know at least a little of what kind of man he was.

I understood how she felt quite well. As thanks for all she had taught me, I would engrave this story deep in my heart as well: the story of the great hero she loved so much.



No matter how close they were, people tended to drift apart over time.

Well, I suppose drifting further apart wasn’t much of an issue for people who weren’t particularly close to begin with. The paths they took in life would continue as they were, sending them in different directions.

But when people who were rather close experienced the same thing, it could create some conflict. Because they were so close, even a slight disconnect could feel immense, a distance they would have otherwise ignored entirely had it been someone less important to them.

I wasn't sure if that was related to the current situation, but Old Gon and Mizuyo had been fighting the night before, and I didn't know why.

Sure, I was the closest person to these two at the moment. Ever since meeting Old Gon here in Outo, the two of them had effectively been taking care of me. But that didn't mean they didn't have any time alone together. I went to the forge during the day, and I would often retire earlier in the night than Old Gon if I started feeling too drunk.

It didn't seem to me like the fight was a huge matter. There was no sign that Mizuyo would return home to Shin because of it, nor did Old Gon make any effort to force her to leave. Fights like this were probably an ordinary, if not necessarily common, occurrence in their long relationship, so I had no intention of sticking my nose into the matter by trying to mediate or take anyone's side. Getting involved could end up complicating things further, to where even if it looked like the problem had been resolved, my interference would leave a lingering sense of awkwardness. If the two of them had a problem, I wanted them to work it out by themselves.

That said, with both Old Gon and Mizuyo in a bad mood, things became quite uncomfortable for a freeloader like myself, so I really hoped they'd work it out sooner rather than later. Not that a little bit of discomfort would send me packing or anything.

"Hey Acer, let's go into town for a bit."

Early one afternoon, Old Gon invited me out into town. Mizuyo gave no reaction at all to our departure as she saw us off, leaving me totally in the dark as to the situation between them.

Interpersonal relationships were quite the enigma. If I were personally involved, I would make its ups and downs my responsibility so that I could move things along as best I could. It went without saying, but there were far more relationships in this world than those I had a part in, as intriguing and troublesome as they could be.

I quietly followed Old Gon through the streets, having no idea where we were going. He didn't appear particularly upset now that we had left. Were we just

going out to drink to help him feel better? As I thought that, he stopped.

“Ah, here we are.”

To my surprise, what we were standing in front of was a tea house. But really, they focused mainly on light meals and desserts...so it was closer to something like a dessert café. Of course, there were no coffees or black teas served here, only various types and qualities of green tea. The food naturally was made to match, comprising things like mochi, dango, and manju.

“My guys say this place is really good. Can you taste some of their stuff for me and tell me what you liked? I really can’t handle sweets in the least,” Old Gon said, looking slightly apologetic.

Ah, now I get it. So that’s what’s happening.

He was here because he wanted to buy something for Mizuyo, but since he wasn’t fond of sweets himself, he needed me to find a good option for her. I didn’t know if this was just an attempt to get back in her good graces, but I had no reason to doubt Old Gon’s motivations. I was sure she’d be happy with the gift.

Though channels were built throughout the city to allow merfolk to come and go, that didn’t mean it was all that easy for her to visit shops like this. While the city made plenty of accommodations for skyfolk and merfolk, only the largest stores could afford to have top-floor entrances or storefronts that faced the canals.

At any rate, if that was what he was after, I was more than happy to help. As much as I liked alcohol, I still loved my sweets.

I had mentioned before many differences in Fusou’s culture from what I was used to when it came to architecture, alcohol, noodles, fish, and even the pickled vegetables we ate here as snacks, but the dessert culture here was also quite unique. Obviously it was different from what you would find in the center of the continent, but there was quite a gap between Fusou and the Ancient Gold Empire as well.

When I took a bite of my first order, a sticky sweetness filled my mouth. A mouthful of tea to follow it up gently rounded out the flavor. Out of curiosity, I

asked one of the waitresses how they sweetened the food here. Aside from sugar, there was also a kind of ivy sap that they could turn into a sweet syrup, as well as candy made from sprouting rice.

Mochi with soybean flour or honey, dango drizzled with its unique sweet-and-salty sauce, manju with red bean paste; all of them used expensive materials and were quite time-consuming to make, so they had the price tags to match. But this was all on Old Gon's dime, so I wasn't going to hold back.

My fingers stuck slightly to the mochi, the dango, and the manju as they brushed across them. When I pressed on them lightly, I could feel a flexible tension. Would these be soft enough to cushion the conflict between Old Gon and Mizuyo? Would these confections be enough to help them stick back together? I hoped so.

While I explored, Old Gon drank some tea, lightly picking at some seaweed-wrapped mochi that wasn't sweet. I was a bit concerned whether he'd choke on it, but he seemed to be in a good mood at least.



A year had passed since I started living at Old Gon's dojo.

Though I couldn't say I had mastered them perfectly, I had learned the blacksmithing techniques of Fusou well enough that with a bit of effort, I could figure out the rest on my own. I had quite a bit of experience blacksmithing at this point, so I just needed to put it to use. I wasn't a student at the forge, but just a guest, so if I could figure it out on my own, I felt I should.

I heard many, many stories from Mizuyo. As knowledgeable as she was, there were still limits to the stories she could tell. Those days, we spent most of our time idly chatting as we stared at the moon.

But above all, I didn't want to steal any more time from her and Old Gon than I had to. The presence of a stranger named Acer had already been clearly etched into their stories. There was a part of me that wanted to see their relationship through with my own eyes, though.

I suspected Mizuyo had come here to look after Old Gon. Well, maybe that wasn't quite it. Perhaps it was more accurate to say she wanted to spend these

last moments as close to him as possible, so she could engrave his memory clearly into her heart, just as I had done with Kaeha. I couldn't bring myself to get in the way of that. Because I could empathize with her so strongly, I knew that no matter how much I wanted to stay, it would be tasteless of me to do so.

But I didn't know Old Gon's thoughts on the matter. Why had he brought me to the dojo and introduced me to Mizuyo? Why had he insisted I stay here so long? The current head of Old Gon's dojo wasn't one of his children, but his most accomplished student. He didn't have any children of his own, apparently.

Because I had grown to like them so much, I decided it was time to leave the dojo. If the two of them had another ten or twenty years, having me around for another couple years might have been a good experience for them...but I knew that when humans got old, that clock could run down extremely fast.

I could understand Mizuyo's feelings far more than Old Gon's.

She would continue to live for a long time, carrying the memories of this time forward with her.

So it was about time for me to set out.

"What? You're leaving already? Why not stay here and relax for a while longer?" Old Gon asked in response to the news.

He was really a troublesome old guy. He didn't need me to say it, but I thought he'd be better off if he was more honest with his feelings.

But this was about him and Mizuyo, not me. There was no need for me to interfere. I didn't know how much time they had left. All that mattered was that they treasured that time together.

"I've relaxed plenty. If I stick around much longer, I'm going to start growing roots. I need to go see the Fusou Tree before I get stuck in place. Old Gon, Mizuyo, thank you for your hospitality. I appreciated it a lot."

I smiled as I bid them farewell. Maybe not for Mizuyo, but this was most likely the last Old Gon and I would ever see of each other. We didn't say it out loud, but it was something we both understood. Chance had crossed our paths and given birth to a great friendship, but the times and places we lived in were just

too different.

If we had met earlier, I imagined he would be the kind of friend I would have spent a great deal of time with. Though actually, that would have meant I would have had a lot less time to spend with Kaeha...so I guess it never would have happened.

“We can avoid the whirlpool, or wrap it around ourselves for protection. So go ahead and live true to yourself. We already know well how good of a person you are, Acer.”

Mizuyo’s goodbye was an exhortation for me to follow whichever path I would choose. No matter what impact I’d have on Fusou, they would adapt and overcome, she was saying. Old Gon rolled his eyes as if she was making a big deal out of nothing, but I was grateful for her consideration.

That said, I also thought she was exaggerating a bit. At least for now, I had no intention of doing something as drastic as splitting the island of Fusou in two. Rather, if things had struck a balance already, I was more inclined to keep out entirely.

Of course, there was no guarantee that balance would be maintained forever. In the same way the hero Takato had rallied the southern kingdom, a hero born among the oni could easily shatter the current stalemate. But there was no reason for me to worry about a future like that. The oni might be powerful, but the humans, skyfolk, and merfolk were anything but weak. Even if their front line was overwhelmed for a time, I was sure they’d find a way to stay in the fight.

“This is my thanks for all you’ve done for me, Mizuyo. I’ll let you decide how you want to use it.” Finally, I handed Mizuyo one of the Mystic Peaches I had brought from the Ancient Gold Empire. I was sure she understood the meaning behind my gesture. If she used it right, she could win a little more time for her and Old Gon.

I hoped the two of them would reach a conclusion they both found satisfying. If I met Mizuyo again someday, I’d have to hear that story.

Leaving Outo, I traveled straight north. This road, leading to the front lines of

the war, was called Soldier's Road. It carried many more people north than it did south. Yet there was no sorrow in the faces traveling alongside me, and none who watched them go did so with pity. That was the strength of the people of Fusou. It was up to them to decide whether that was tragic or worthy of celebration, and it seemed like the people here had decided it was the latter. That was the way they lived.

I walked alone down that road, occasionally digressing quite a bit off the path to avoid interacting with the other travelers. I had no intention of visiting the city of Chinju that lay at the end of this road. Only those who hoped to be soldiers giving their lives to protect Fusou, or those hired as mercenaries to fight alongside them, could enter that place, and I qualified as neither. I had no desire at all to be sucked into their army and ordered around. All I wanted was to see the Fusou Tree beyond them.



My journey in Fusou—no, my journey since the day I left Ludoria—finally came to its conclusion as I reached the base of the Fusou Tree, an enormous tree that looked like it stretched right up into heaven. Though to be more accurate, I was only standing at the edge of an enormous lake surrounding the base of the Fusou Tree.

To make it this far, I had needed to diverge from the main road, avoid the city of Chinju, and evade the patrols. Avoiding the notice of the skyfolk was actually incredibly difficult. Luckily, they didn't have much in the way of night vision, so I had been able to move under the cover of darkness.

"Fusou Tree." As I stared at the enormous tree, I called its name. As I did, the earth around me began to rumble, the lake in front of me starting to ripple.

Even in the moonlight, I could clearly see a black shape rise up out of the water. It was one of the Fusou Tree's roots. Splitting earth and water, the root rose right in front of me, so I hopped onto it. I could have asked the water spirits for help in walking across the surface of the lake if I wanted to, but if the tree was offering to carry me itself, I had no reason to turn it down.

That said, this was the first time I had ridden the roots of such an enormous tree. As it moved to carry me across the lake, I had to admit I was more than a

little scared. The root lifted me higher and higher, until one of the tree's branches reached down toward me. As I moved over onto the proffered branch, the root returned to its resting place in the water, and the branch lifted me farther upward.

Okay, we were going way too fast. This was really getting scary.

The sight of the enormous tree moving like this must have been incredible, but I was huddled down and clutching the branch as tightly as I could, so I could hardly enjoy the experience.

But as it lifted me up into the air, I did notice something. The lake at the base of the Fusou Tree served as a border between the northern kingdom of oni and southern kingdom of humans, merfolk, and skyfolk. Such a large body of water restricted the land access between the north and south ends of the island, making it difficult to move large numbers of troops. Those limited crossings thus became critical defense points. The stalemate between the northern and southern kingdoms—or in other words, the reason a balance had been struck between them—was in part because of the Fusou Tree.

I was lifted from lower branches to higher ones, one after another, brought ever upward. I eventually reached the clouds and continued to ascend even farther. This would have been an impressive sight during the daytime, but at night it was more terrifying, not to mention freezing cold. That said, being just a little closer to the moon, seeing it just a little bigger, did make it surprisingly more beautiful, enough so that it made me feel like my journey all the way here had been worth it.

At long last, I made it up to the hollow at the top of the Fusou Tree's trunk. It looked almost like...and I know how strange this sounds, but it looked almost like a chair. A huge chair, like one that would fit the true giants who were said to live up here. So although it was far too large to accommodate someone like me, I sat down and looked around.

As I did, the branch that had carried me up here dropped something beside me with a heavy thud. It was an enormous fruit. Each of its pods were the size of my head, the fruit itself larger than my entire body. Aside from its size, it looked pretty close to a mulberry. It also gave off a similar feeling to apuas or

Mystic Peaches. That meant that this must have been the Spirit Tree of the giants after all.

When I broke off one of the pods and took a bite, the frigid cold that had me shivering up until now suddenly vanished. Though it seemed larger than should have fit into my stomach, I worked my way through the whole thing. I didn't feel the slightest bit of cold anymore. Rather, a pleasant, comfortable warmth filled my body, to the point that I started feeling drowsy.

Ah, so that was it. The Fusou Tree was asking me to stay here and sleep for the night. Considering the effort it had taken me to travel from Outo up and around Chinju without being spotted, I did have to say I was quite exhausted. Taking a little nap didn't sound like a bad idea.

Lying down and shutting my eyes, I could feel my consciousness slip away...out of my body and down into the Fusou Tree.

As I dreamed, I had become a tree. An enormous tree, planted and raised here by an enormous person. They eventually returned to the world above the clouds, so I grew to chase after them. Up into the clouds, farther, and into the sky beyond. The person who had planted me here was overjoyed by my growth, and occasionally came to visit. Whether it was once every ten years, or once every one hundred years, it was hard to tell with only the senses of a tree.

But whenever the person came, they sat down here and looked over the land, so eventually I took an interest in the land below as well. There were numerous tiny people living below me, and for some strange reason, they were always fighting. The large person said to me:

"Through conflict, they keep their numbers in check, refine themselves, and advance forward. The life-giving waters you provide ensure they will prosper, that they will have the power to fight and survive."

Even with that explanation, it was difficult for me to understand. But it seemed like the large person was expecting something of the smaller ones, enough that they had planted me here to make it easier for them to live.

So I continued to watch over the tiny people living under me. Though the war they fought stood out, when I looked closer, I could see how they lived their lives outside of battle as well. Both sides of the conflict drank the water I provided for them, giving birth to new children. They grew, and then eventually died. Sometimes in old age, sometimes in battle, though in all manner of ways, that's how the tiny people lived their lives.

When would the big person come to visit me again? As I watched over the tiny people below, I had countless questions to ask. So I continued my watch, waiting patiently for the day they would be answered.

The next thing I knew, everything around me was bright, the sun shining brilliantly overhead. Back with my own eyes, I couldn't see the lives of the oni unfolding to the north. Instead, I saw the mountains tinged purple by the rising sun and the sparkling water flowing down from the Fusou Tree.

Ah, so this was the scenic beauty that the Japanese saying "purple mountains and shining water" meant to convey. It was nostalgic, lonely, and exciting all at once.

I took one more pod from the Fusou Tree's fruit and took a bite. The perfect blend of sweet and sour went down quite easily. Once again, I found myself strangely able to eat a lot more than I should have, but the drowsiness didn't come this time. It seemed the fatigue had drained out of me completely. After I finished eating, a seed about the size of a closed fist was left over, so I put it into my bag.

I imagined the dream I had seen the night before was of the Fusou Tree's memories. In that dream, I had met the giants and watched over the land of Fusou. Even the Fusou Tree didn't seem to understand what the giants were trying to accomplish. But it was clear that, at least in a broad sense, the giants were aware of what was happening here in Fusou. In other words, they recognized the oni as simply another race that lived here, a people worthy of their protection.

I had seen a lot of things here in Fusou, but I had yet to come to a conclusion on whether it was best to consider these oni to be people or monsters. I

suspected that stepping into their territory would result in a fight to the death, so it didn't seem I'd have a chance to talk things over with them. I imagined the oni had their own thoughts on it, but I was starting to let go of the idea that Fusou would be better off without them. Their presence here in Fusou had tied the land of Fusou together and prompted all sorts of development.

So I would trust in the judgment of the giants, and in the people of Fusou themselves. There was no guarantee the giants had some superior perspective or benevolent intentions, but at the very least I had seen the strength of the people who lived here for myself. So I would do nothing. I would leave both north and south to their own devices, and leave the island bearing the Fusou Tree behind.

My journey here had been far from a worthless endeavor. There had been good food, good drink, plenty of culture to explore, and good people to meet. And here at the end, I was able to see this tree, look out from its crown, and confirm the existence of the giants for myself. If the giants were real, then Airena's White Lake almost certainly existed.

If I waited here for a few decades, I could potentially meet those giants for myself, but I decided against it for now. While I had food and water from the Fusou Tree, just sitting around waiting that long would be too boring. No matter how stunning the view was, its magnificence would fade if I stared at it too long.

So if there was a reason for me to return, or if I ever craved this scenery, I could come back and climb this tree again. I had plenty of time to do so. Whether for good or ill, that was the life that was given to me.

With plenty of stories to bring back for Kaeha, I was satisfied with the conclusion of my trip.

"Veening, Fos, Nuruth, Un, Zam."

With the words of the levitation spell on my lips, I jumped from the top of the Fusou Tree. It was time, at long last, to start heading home.

Chapter 2 — The Blue Road Home

I returned back on the path I had come from, careful not to be seen by anyone. Considering how large the Fusou Tree was, people would have been able to see it lifting me up from an incredible distance away. The frontline fortress city of Chinju already looked to be in an uproar...and I suspected that the commotion would reach Outo soon enough. If they learned that the tree's movement was all because of me, things would probably get worse. I had decided not to interfere with what was happening in Fusou any further, so I didn't want anyone to catch me. I suspected Old Gon and Mizuyo would realize it was my fault on their own, but knowing those two, I was sure they'd understand and laugh it off.

After about a month of travel, I had made it back to Sunsea Harbor and boarded a ship headed for the mainland. That said, Fusou only did trade with the Ancient Gold Empire, so this ship could only take me as far as Blue Sea Province. From there, I'd have to find another ship to carry me to the center of the continent. It was quite a journey, so I'd probably have to change ships a number of times.

There were apparently some ships that traveled directly from Blue Sea Province to the center of the continent, but booking passage on one would be quite challenging, as they were huge ships that traveled in fleets controlled by the government. It wasn't the kind of ship some stranger could hop onto just by passing them a bit of coin, and they didn't make the journey all that frequently anyway. It was possible the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire would book a trip specifically for me if I asked them...but I didn't want to be such a burden on them.

Anyway, as homesick as I was starting to feel, I wasn't really in that much of a rush. Even if it took some time changing ships here and there, as long as I made it home there was no problem. I would rather take the chance to enjoy the voyage.

Taking a look around the ship, the atmosphere was quite different from the one on the ship that had brought me to Fusou. That time I had been surrounded by men looking like mercenaries, but this time it was just me and the crew. Fusou really was that kind of place, wasn't it?

A traveler heading back to Blue Sea Province from Fusou was rare enough, let alone an elf—or in their terms, a forestfolk—so the crew and captain had all sorts of questions for me.

“I've been traveling all over. I went to Fusou to see the Fusou Tree. It was incredible! It was big enough to put all the other giant trees I've seen to shame.”

But after an answer like that, most of them were satisfied. In particular, the crewmen who had been born in Fusou were particularly happy to hear my evaluation. It was impossible to say Fusou was a safe place to live, but the pride they felt at seeing a stranger so enchanted by the symbol of their nation showed just how much they loved their homeland. After all the experiences I had there and all the people I met, I could understand how they felt.

The only problem was when they brought up the rumors of the Fusou Tree moving. It seemed it had caused quite an uproar after all.

Minute by minute, one of my newfound loves in the land of Fusou receded into the distance.

Apparently I had left a good impression on the crew, as when we made it back to Blue Sea Province, they helped me find a ship to take me farther. Though there were plenty of ships about, the quality of the voyage they offered differed vastly between them. They might have been similar to carriages in that they carried people and goods, but you couldn't just step off a ship if things went sour. Well, okay, technically I could and just walk back to land, but normally you couldn't. As such, the captain and crew of a ship held a great deal of authority when at sea. It wasn't all that uncommon for them to use their leverage to force all sorts of things on their passengers.

However, rumors of their behavior and attitude would flow through the cities naturally, allowing one to get a good grasp on the good and bad ships. On top of that, an introduction from fellow sailors would probably result in better

treatment, as they wouldn't want to build a poor reputation among their colleagues. It was really quite a help. Though I wasn't in a hurry, that didn't mean I was interested in suffering through my trip.

With the help of the captain of the ship that brought me here, and after a two-night stay in Blue Sea Province, I boarded another ship. I used that free time to write a letter about what I'd learned in Fusou to the mystics.

The ship I boarded traveled south and then west, skirting around Red Mountain Province, stopping at a few of the islands along the way to one of the kingdoms south of the Great Grasslands, known as Mintar. After unloading its cargo and stocking up on new goods, it would be heading back to Blue Sea Province, so I'd swap ships again there. It seemed my best course of action was to build a good relationship with the crew during our trip, in hopes they could recommend to me a good option for heading farther west.

I held my arms out to the side, basking in the sea wind.

Ah, that's right. About my journey to Mintar, and what led to my good luck in getting a recommendation for another ship...

The problems you could face at sea weren't just limited to the quality of the ship and crew that carried you. The sea in this world was teeming with monsters. Like their landbound counterparts, they were strong, intelligent, and violent. However, compared to the boats that plied the inland rivers, the ships traveling the seas were enormous. When it came to nature, monsters were no exception in recognizing that size represented strength. There weren't many monsters willing to challenge a ship large enough to cross the ocean. There were some, of course, but they tended to stick to their own territory, so through no small amount of sacrifice, sailors had managed to map out safe routes around them.

Even though the sea appeared to be a flat, unmarked expanse to me, it was actually covered by a network of roads. However, once the route a ship could take was limited, that created easy hunting grounds for another kind of threat: pirates.



“It’s Skrolm!”

A cry came down from the lookout atop the ship's mast, immediately whipping the crew into a frenzy.

Skrolm was a large nation—similar in size to our destination of Mintar—that fought for control of these waters. They were a country that prospered on maritime trade. So why would the crew be concerned about sighting them? Well, to Mintari traders, the Skrolm Navy were effectively pirates. As you might expect, the people of Skrolm saw the Mintari ships as nuisances that were only good for the riches that could be looted. Interfering with their trade became not only natural but a matter of policy in their fight to control the sea.

That said, they still recognized the value in these merchants who traveled the seas. It wasn't all that uncommon for such merchants to switch affiliations, so it was rather rare for the Skrolm Navy to kill or sink merchant ships. Instead, they imposed a toll on passage through their territory, taking a portion of the money and goods on board to ensure that trade with other nations wouldn't be profitable.

Of course, Mintar and all of their other rival nations practiced similar behavior. Though it was a brutish practice from my perspective, it was common sense here on the open seas. Besides, it wasn't just navy ships the merchants had to worry about. There were also state-sanctioned and independent pirates to deal with.

From this distance, it did appear we were dealing with an official navy ship. There was a large contraption on the deck that looked like a ballista made to fire an anchor. When thinking of ships, I imagined they would be armed with cannons, but gunpowder had yet to be developed in this world, so navies armed themselves with ballistae and catapults instead. In short, they lacked firepower when it came to sinking ships. Their ranged weaponry was only intended to inhibit and restrict their target's movement, while the real battle would be settled in close quarters.

Though the Skrolm ship was equipped with sails, most of its power came from its oars. The oarsmen would take up arms and join the fight once they got close, so we were clearly outnumbered. But as for our speed, we had a good wind behind us, so even with our ship heavy with merchandise, we were still coming out ahead.

“They’re not that close. We’re running! Full speed ahead!”

It seemed the captain of our ship—a man named Suin from the Ancient Gold Empire—had reached the same conclusion, as he immediately gave the order to try and outrun them. The lookout had sighted them quickly, so we still had a considerable distance between us. At this rate, we might be able to escape without issue.

That is, if nothing else were to happen. Of course, we were not so fortunate.

Even if they were engaged in piracy, we were up against a military vessel. We couldn’t expect them to be on the same level as common criminals. Not in some abstract mental sense, but their training, equipment, and numbers all made them exceptionally powerful. The biggest problem facing us right now was the last of those.

“Captain Suin, we can’t keep going in this direction.”

While at sea, the members of their crew surrendered everything they had to their captain. Knowing this rule, I hesitated on whether to speak up or not, but in the end I steeled myself and interrupted him giving orders.

“What? I know you’re a forestfolk, but you agreed to listen to what I say while we’re at sea. You can see how busy we are right now, so please don’t bother us.” Despite the frenzy of the crew and Suin himself, he made a clear effort to remain calm and collected as he shut me down.

Well, that was about the answer I expected. He was quite wealthy for a citizen of the Ancient Gold Empire, and quite knowledgeable as well, so he knew to be polite with a forestfolk or elf like myself. If he had been from anywhere else, I likely would have gotten more than an earful of angry ranting.

“I understand, but there are two ships waiting ahead of us in this direction. If we keep going this way, you might be in trouble.”

But he *wasn’t* from anywhere else, so I figured he might actually listen to what I had to say. I imagined the two ships I could now see ahead of us were in cahoots with the ship chasing us from behind. Otherwise there would be no reason for the ship behind us to continue its pursuit while clearly lacking the

speed to catch up. They were using their superior numbers to surround us. We were heading right into the middle of their net.

Suin's expression grew dark. It seemed he fully understood the situation we were in now and regretted making the choice to run. Naturally, the toll levied on ships that tried to run was much greater than those who obediently came to a stop. It encouraged them to be more cooperative in the future and made an example of them for other ships.

There was also the possibility that the captains of the three ships had, in order to sate their own greed, specifically tried to trick Suin's ship into running so they might charge that extra toll. Even on a military ship, the authority a captain held at sea was next to absolute. The more they collected in tolls and fines, the heavier their own pockets grew.

I didn't hold that against them or anything. Even if they were part of the navy, life on the open seas was still dangerous. Without some sort of incentive, there would be no reason for anyone to take up the post. I was only bothered that they happened to be targeting the ship I was on.

I was sure the Skrolm navy had their own circumstances to consider, but that went for Suin and the crew of this ship as well. Suin had chosen to run because he knew that submitting to the navy's toll could have a significant impact on his future business. And I, as someone who had booked passage on this ship, prioritized their goals over the navy's.

"You can escape by going that way, though," I said, pointing.

We had a strong tailwind keeping us ahead of the pursuing galley. If we changed direction, we'd lose the speed the wind was giving us and be caught by the ship behind us. That was why the other two ships had set up downwind of us.

But Suin stared at me for only a few seconds before he started barking out orders. "All right, I'm trusting you on this one. Hard to port! The wind is about to change! Be ready for it!"



Ah, men of the sea were all very adaptable. Hearing Suin's shout was distinctly pleasing.

"Wind and water..."

So I couldn't hold back either. I entreated the aid of the spirits in the wind blowing past us and in the great sea below us to push our ship in our new direction.



As we were heading west, the turn left sent us southward. You might wonder why I bring up something so obvious, but the important point is that heading south sent us farther away from land.

I mentioned it briefly before, but ships that traveled the seas had to map out routes around the territories of monsters large enough to threaten them. Otherwise, those large monsters would sink the ships, along with all of their crew and cargo. Even if the crew escaped on lifeboats, those would simply be attacked by smaller monsters. Effectively, aside from special exceptions like myself, if a ship sank at sea, the entire crew was lost. If they were incredibly lucky, there was a vanishingly small chance survivors could be washed ashore, though.

As such, the captains of seafaring ships kept a careful eye on the territorial claims of these monsters, cooperating with each other to share information about and manage the sea lanes. Sailors stayed up to date on the movements of monsters whenever they made port, while the navies of each nation kept the information they found in strict confidence.

And this is probably obvious too, but the knowledge of these monsters' territories was better as you got closer to shore. In other words, the farther from land you sailed, the less information you had, and the more dangerous the sea became. Thus, sailors typically preferred to stay as close to land as possible.

There were exceptions of course. For example, the merfolk living near Fusou shared information about the monsters living in the seas even in parts far from land. As long as one had that information, even voyaging far out to sea could be relatively safe. In fact, trade between distant continents was basically

impossible without the help of the merfolk.

Anyway, all that is to say that once we turned south, our pursuer immediately gave up the chase. But of course, that didn't mean we could return to our standard route. If we did that, we would no doubt be caught.

According to the information Captain Suin held, there was only one safe route through the sea to the south, leading to the island nation of Badomode, a place he would otherwise not plan to visit. The island of Badomode had a population of about four thousand humans. I wasn't sure whether that counted as a large or small population, but either way, it seemed those humans weren't the rulers of the island. Before we entered port, Suin warned me that Badomode was actually controlled by, of all things, fairies. Yes, the same as that wicked race who lived in the Great Grasslands.

The fairies made their homes at the center of the island, while the people living on the coasts fished and farmed to provide tribute for them, treating them like gods. Occasionally the fairies kidnapped children and merged them into their collective consciousness, but it seemed the humans of the island considered such a fate to be a blessing. It sounded like madness to me, but if that was their faith, I supposed I didn't have the right to criticize them.

Upon further investigation, I learned that the people of Badomode considered the honey made by and given to them by the fairies to be something of extreme value. This honey was inaccessible to anyone from beyond the island, and it was said that a single taste induced a state of ecstatic euphoria.

Quite long ago, some sailors who had been unable to fight their curiosity stole some and tasted it. While they had been executed for the crime, their faces were all fixed with expressions of bliss until the moment their heads were severed. Some of their comrades had attempted to sneak them out of the island, but the perpetrators had refused to leave. Even knowing of their impending execution, they were unwilling to leave the island and lose access to that honey.

An induced state of euphoria and total dependence...no matter how you looked at it, it wasn't a good substance. That was the kind of place Badomode was.

The fairies here all lived in well-known places, so exterminating them was likely possible, but I doubted the people who lived there wanted that. There was no place for me to criticize them, nor to act.

So in order to avoid causing trouble for the people in Badomode, for the entire time our ship was in port there, I stayed on the ship. Fairies had much sharper senses than humans did, so if they recognized that a threat like me had encroached on their territory, there was a good chance it would provoke an extreme response.

Captain Suin and his first mate left to gather as much information about the sea around Badomode as possible, while the ship's paymaster set about feverishly reworking his trade plan to account for their unexpected visit to this port. A port was a facility that drew in wealth from all around. Maintaining such infrastructure was no small amount of work, so once a ship had docked, they couldn't just leave without engaging in some form of trade. They had to determine their next course, select what goods to sell from their stores to the locals, and find things to fill that newly empty space with. Of course, they would only take on cargo that had some sort of demand associated with it in future ports. Laying out careful plans for trade was no small amount of work. As such, the ship would likely be staying in Badomode for two or three days.

Using a fishing rod borrowed from one of the crew members, I spent my time idly fishing and looking at the sky. The sunlight was strong here, the sky a startlingly deep blue. You would expect as much from an island this far south of the continent, but there were many differences between this place and the ones I was familiar with. Even the spirits in the wind and sea seemed somehow more relaxed.

Speaking of which, I seemed to remember hearing stories somewhere of flying insects like grasshoppers who had been carried by the wind all the way across the sea. I wondered if that was how the fairies made it all the way out to this island. If that was the case, there were a number of interesting mysteries to think about. The fairies were a race who sacrificed their individuality to obtain immortality as a single collective consciousness. It was hard for me to believe that the mental link between the individual members could cross such a great distance. So, my conjecture went, it might have been the case that individual

swarms of fairies held their own collective consciousnesses, and they would make contact with other swarms when needed, serving as backups for each other. That would preserve the immortality of the race.

But if I was correct, that meant the fairies in Badomode were outside the immortal structure of the rest of their race. Perhaps it was obvious, but being isolated by the sea like this, traveling back and forth between the mainland and the island was not especially easy. Even if fairies could fly, their bodies were small and light enough that attempting to reach the mainland from this island through the winds over the sea was very much a gamble.

What had driven them to move to such a difficult-to-reach location? I felt these fairies had intentionally moved to a place where they couldn't receive backup from other swarms...or more likely, they had been exiled here.

Of course, there was no way I could know why that would be the case. Had they done something to get them cut off from the rest of their people? Or had they embraced an idea that fairykind couldn't accept? Or maybe they had contracted some disease that afflicted only fairies? No matter the reason, this particular swarm could no longer live on the mainland, and so had risked its life to cross the sea and find a new home here. The fact they had succeeded was a stroke of hard-fought luck for them.

As a result, they had ended up developing a cooperative relationship with the humans living here. I thought that was an interesting outcome, even if their methods were ethically questionable.

As I mulled over these thoughts in my head, there was a strong pull on the rod in my hands. A pull this strong must have come from quite a sizable fish. Without rushing or applying undue force, I let the fish lead my line here and there as I waited for it to exhaust itself. In this place where the sun, the sky, and the wind were all so different, what kind of fish would I catch?



On our second night in Badomode, someone broke into the ship. One could argue the port security had let down their guard, but even so, being able to sneak onto a ship, slip past the large number of crew members, and break into my room entirely undetected was an act of considerable skill. Depending on the

circumstances, there was a good chance I wouldn't have noticed them either. Their infiltration had been just that stealthy, like they had melted into the darkness of the night.

However, even at port, even within the confines of the ship, this was the territory of the powerful water spirits of the ocean. The moment the intruder stepped foot on our ship, the spirits began to stir, striking the ship with waves to alert me. So the moment that intruder silently cracked open my door and peeked inside, the instant they stepped foot into the room...

"Stop. If you move an inch, we're enemies. Your body might not mean much to you, but that means war against every one of you on this island."

Having got out of bed, I held my magic sword ready, though still in its sheath. I was skilled enough with it that I could handle most opponents with the sword still sheathed, but more importantly, I had decided this was the most effective way to handle this particular intruder.

And as I had expected, the intruder immediately shrank back from the sheath, trying to keep as much distance from it as possible. As dark as it was, I was more than capable of tracking the intruder's movements, and I was sure they could see mine as well. Technically speaking, shrinking back like that counted as "moving an inch," but I had intentionally held my sword out knowing it would scare them back, so I'd let that one slide.

It seemed the story that fairies hated Fairy's Silver was true. Because yes, there was no doubt in my mind that the intruder was a fairy. But the figure confronting me was not a tiny winged person who might fit in the palm of my hand, but a young human girl garbed in a black cloak and a white ceramic mask. She looked to be twelve or thirteen years old. She must have been one of the children of the island, assimilated by the fairies. While I couldn't say the thought made me happy, I had already decided not to interfere with the island's customs.

"U-Urgh... Ancient one, we have no wish for hostility. We beg, please don't point it at us," she squeezed out. The intruder's attitude was undoubtedly one of submission, so for now I nodded, lowering the point of the sword. Of course, just because she wasn't openly hostile didn't mean I could trust her. But while I

held the threat of the Fairy's Silver over her, the conversation wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Ancient one, gratitude for your mercy. We are Ci. Cut off from our comrades on the mainland, we built this colony here. We have a request of the ancient one, and so arrived."

The child had a halting, awkward way of speaking. Being something like a terminal for the fairies, whose minds were all connected, there was no reason for them to speak aloud to each other. That must have been why speaking like this was a challenge for her; she just wasn't used to it.

Unmoved by her faltering voice nor the emotion it carried, I urged her to continue. The first and most important thing was to think calmly and rationally. My pity for the girl who had been taken over by the fairies, my resentment toward fairies in general, and the feelings engendered by her halting speech would all interfere with my ability to make a sound decision.

"We beg. Please give us the fruit of life, you possess. Now, we have no connection with other swarms. Our numbers slowly fall." The girl bowed.

I still remained unmoving, waiting for her to go on. What did it mean for a single terminal among the fairies to bow its head to me? Without being a fairy myself, I had no way of knowing.

However, I had sort of guessed what kind of problem the local fairies might be facing. Their objective was the Mystic Peaches in my pack that I had brought from the sacred forest of the elves in the Ancient Gold Empire. They were after the fruit of a Spirit Tree, no different from an apua. I figured the fruit of the Fusou Tree likely fell in the same category, but those would be a bit too big for me to carry around.

"With the fruit of life, we can restore our ability to grow. We can produce again. Your visit here must be fate, ancient one. Please. We beg. Save us." Over and over the girl bowed her head. Seeing the fairy in human form acting like that started to move me a bit. When it came down to it, I really liked humans.

So now I understood what was happening. The problem faced by the fairies here on Badomode was their lack of genetic diversity. While fairies as a species had some false form of immortality, I didn't know how long the individual

bodies lived for. I suspected the span of a fairy generation was quite short though, likely much shorter than that of a human. With that being the case, they aimed for immortality as a race rather than as individuals.

Without new blood coming in from outside the swarm, their short life spans accelerated the process at which their bloodlines mixed. I didn't know much about the difficulties such stagnation would cause, but judging by the fairy's explanation, it was starting to have an impact on their reproductive functions.

And then just in time, I had come to their island with a bag of Mystic Peaches, one of the fruits of life. It wasn't an exaggeration to call these fruits a concentration of life force. The fruit of a Spirit Tree would easily restore the declining bodily functions of these fairies. This was a miraculous opportunity for them.

That said, with no way to leave the island, the Mystic Peaches would only delay the inevitable if things continued as they were. But it *would* buy them a tremendous amount of time, perhaps enough for them to find another, more permanent solution.

"I see. I understand your situation. But why should I help you?"

With all that being said, I didn't care much about their situation. Though I wasn't interested in actively wiping them out, that didn't mean I was keen to help them survive. "Besides, you snuck in here hoping to steal them while I slept, didn't you?" There was no other reason for her to have silently sneaked onto the ship in the dead of night.

Though there was also the possibility she had intended to kill me and take all of my possessions. Either way, I wasn't particularly angry. It would have been my own fault for letting my guard down. But of course, that wasn't helping the fairies' case either.

Considering all that, though, I didn't refuse their request to speak. In the end, I could ignore them if this was a problem for the fairies alone. But in their death throes, there was no telling what would happen to the humans who lived around them. For example, if those humans perished along with the fairies, information about the sea around the island would all be lost, making a large portion of the sea no longer safe to travel. That would no doubt result in more

than a few ships straying off the sea lanes and into monster territory, inevitably leading to their demise.

I had grown to like the sailors who brought me from Fusou back to the Ancient Gold Empire, and the ones aboard Suin's ship. If a threat might come to their colleagues, or potentially to themselves, I wanted to nip it in the bud.

But of course, there was no need for me to tell the fairies that. Even if I was willing to part with the peaches, I would need to draw a fittingly heavy price out of them to leave them with a measure of humility. When it came to dealing with fairies, if you didn't have an overwhelming amount of leverage over them, you couldn't accomplish much of anything.

"W-We are prepared to trade our secret honey for them." Despite the darkness, it seemed the fairy noticed my glare, as she immediately began to grow flustered. But those words had me lift my sword once again.



“Sounds like you just want me dependent on your honey so you can control me.”

The honey produced by the fairies here was undeniably valuable, but I had no desire for something that would leave me dependent on it. It was possible studying it could turn up medicinal applications for the substance. In particular, there was a good chance it could make a powerful painkiller. But even so, I had no intentions of getting involved with such a malicious substance. It wasn't a matter of balancing the benefits and drawbacks. I just didn't like it. Of course, it went without saying that I would never partake of it myself in any situation.

I couldn't tell what the fairy's intentions had been with her offer. It was quite likely that she was just trying to offer me the most valuable thing they had. But even so...or rather, even more so, trying to use a substance that created such a powerful dependence without malicious intent made them even more dangerous. If they were using the honey as a means of controlling people, then at least they would reap the consequences of the seeds they had sown. If they were just thoughtlessly passing out the honey because it was valuable, creating dependencies among their victims would cause nothing but suffering.

Depending on the situation, it wasn't unthinkable that someone might try and monopolize its production, capturing and enslaving the entire colony of fairies on the island. For example, if I hadn't known about the dependence and tasted it for myself, I almost certainly would have done so.

“O-Of course not!” Beneath my mounting pressure and the threat of the Fairy's Silver in my scabbard pointed at her once again, the fairy girl desperately cried an apology. Even if her mind had been subsumed by the fairies, threatening a small human girl like this was painful for me. She had been clearly cowed by my display, so I figured my threats had been sufficient. It was about time to wrap up these negotiations.

From the start, there was nothing in particular I wanted from the fairies. After all, I hadn't paid for these Mystic Peaches or anything. They had been given to me for free. I had a few ideas of how I wanted to use them, but I could part with a few without impacting my plans significantly.

I demanded a price from them because I knew that, while cowardly and

cautious, fairies were also cruel and malicious creatures. If I thoughtlessly caved in to their wishes and helped restore their ability to reproduce, that malice could easily be turned on the people of Badomode. I doubted it would be enough to shatter the relationship currently established between them, but it could always grow worse. I previously thought that was the kind of creature a fairy was. Speaking with the human girl they had possessed only served to confirm my suspicions.

So rather than just taking anything the fairies might offer, I wanted to demand something of them that they could only obtain from the humans that lived here. Be it money, ornaments, or alcohol, I wanted something to make the humans here more valuable in the eyes of the fairies. As it was, there seemed to be some kind of balance struck between the fairies and the humans of Badomode. The humans weren't being unilaterally oppressed, but were resolutely facing the hardships of life with the gifts of the fairies. If the fairies had complete control of everything, they wouldn't accept foreign ships in their ports.

But if the fairies grew in number, the value of the humans they dealt with needed to increase in the same way to maintain that balance. I didn't know how much a demand like that would impact the fairies' behavior, but there was no harm in trying.

The grand total of goods I requested from them in money, decorative ornaments, and alcohol came to a value of about fifty large gold coins. Yes, the same amount Airen had paid me for an apua back when we first met, or maybe even a little more. In reality, fruit like these weren't really in circulation, so just collecting fifty large gold coins together didn't mean you could buy one. But my goal wasn't to make money, so that price suited me fine.

After handing over one of the peaches, the people of Badomode hauled in all sorts of goods into my room on the ship the next day. It seemed the fairies weren't foolish enough to back out on a promise.

Captain Suin had been quite shocked by the whole affair and asked me what was happening, but explaining all of it was too much of a pain. There were a lot of delicate matters involved, like the situation among the fairies here and the

fact I was carrying Mystic Peaches with me. In the end, I didn't explain much of anything, just telling him it was a deal between the fairies and the elves, and that to apologize for the trouble I'd give him one of the casks of alcohol. Because after all, it was nice they brought it all here, but having so many casks of alcohol in my room was getting in the way. There was no way it would all fit.

That afternoon, with all of our preparations complete, we left Badomode behind. Our unexpected diversion complete, we headed again for the coastal powerhouse of Mintar, where I would transfer to another ship on my way farther west.



“Cheers to our friend!”

Following Captain Suin's lead, the crewmen struck their wooden mugs together. They then immediately drained them and started pouring more. It was a rather uncivilized kind of banquet, but that was fine.

The alcohol was rather sweet to the taste. Was it made from sugarcane? You might think of something like rum, distilled from the juices of the sugarcane plant once the sugar had been extracted from it, but this was different. This seemed to be made from sugarcane itself being fermented. It was quite the interesting drink. The flavor wasn't bad either.

Satisfied with my taste test, I took a bigger gulp. The alcohol content wasn't all that high, so I'd be able to drink a good amount. I then reached for some food, grabbing a rib and taking a bite.

On a ship like this, meat had to be preserved by salting it, so having an actual fatty meat to feast on was quite a luxury. I had provided the drinks for this feast from my haul in Badomode, while Captain Suin had provided the food. Apparently he had predicted a party like this happening and had gone out of his way to procure some fresh meat. As expected of a first-rate merchant like him, he certainly knew what he was doing.

Eating fresh meat like this for the first time in a while made me long to go out hunting again. While part of it was wanting to eat a nice steak still dripping blood, the joy of hunting something yourself and eating every last part of it was something I missed. Though it wouldn't be for a while, once I made it back to

the center of the continent, I'd have to find a good forest to go hunting in.

As I looked around the room, I met eyes with one of the crewmen who was on watch, and so was unable to participate in the festivities. I could empathize with his feelings, as he looked away awkwardly. Anyone would be jealous watching other people feasting and drinking. But I was sure Suin would provide ample compensation for those who were unable to join in, so I could only ask those on guard to bear with their suffering.

I took another drink. One after another, the crewmen came by to thank me for providing the drinks, but I didn't think it was worth all the fuss. There was no way I'd be able to drink that much on my own, so it was more fun for me to use it all like this anyway.

Once we docked in Mintar, I'd be saying goodbye to this ship and its crew. Getting the chance to make some memories eating and drinking with them before then wasn't bad.

"Hey, Mr. Forestfolk...er, Acer. How'd you like to stay on as a member of the crew?" In the middle of the feast, Captain Suin ambushed me with that question. Unable to grasp what he was getting at, I just tilted my head. "Of course, not as just any ordinary crewman," he explained. "I'll come up with some official post for you. No matter what special treatment there'd be, the crew won't mind if it's for you," he hurriedly added. Apparently he was being quite serious.

It didn't sound like a bad deal, actually. Working on a ship that sailed across the world actually sounded like it would suit me fairly well. I liked the straightforward way sailors thought, and living on the sea constantly surrounded by the wind made me feel closer to the spirits as well.

I might give it a shot someday. Though rather than working on a ship, I think I'd enjoy having one of my own. With the wind and water spirits to help me, I could sail anywhere in the world. Even the thought of it had my heart racing.

But unfortunately, that was all the more reason I had to shake my head.

"I'm happy for the offer, but I can't accept it right now. There are still places I have to go, and people waiting for me."

The allure of that kind of a journey meant I couldn't go now. If I boarded a ship and got lost in traveling the world, the people I knew from on land would be gone before I knew it. Of course, my people back in Pulha, the spirits, the golden dragon, and the mystics were all immortal, so they were a different matter. But even Airena and the other elves would die before me. Even the graves of the people I had known would rot away before my time came.

"Oh, really? That's too bad. But you know, Acer, I'm never going to forget this experience of having a forestfolk on board...though I guess we still have quite a ways to go before reaching Mintar. Glad to have your company." In the face of my refusal, Suin offered his hand, which I gladly shook.

At that exact moment, the alcohol might have finally started getting to people's heads, as a commotion broke out among the crew. The event I'd been waiting for had finally begun.

Letting go of Suin's hand, I pulled out my gloves and slipped them on, balling my hands up tight. Suin had already said he'd always remember me, but I'd make a legend here that not a single one of the crewmen would forget. I would knock out every last one of them.

I flashed a smile to the surprised Suin, and leaped into the fray.



Being on the sea meant constantly feeling the waves. Even in my cabin on the ship, lying lazily on my bed and dozing off, that didn't change. The sound of waves lapping against the hull of the ship, and the hull creaking in turn, were all different from what you would hear on shore. That was about as natural a phenomenon as you could get, but it also served as a way for me to communicate with the water spirits in the sea. You could think of it as the voice of the ocean.

Without warning, the waves rocking our ship changed. The difference was sharp enough that I noticed it immediately, even while half asleep. The waves had become strong but small, excited but careful not to damage the ship. It was like a child pulling at your sleeve, eager to show you something new they discovered.

I slowly opened my eyes, then got to looking for what the spirits were excited

about. The spirits living in the ocean were refined and composed, sometimes even wrathful. They rarely showed excitement like this. When I asked what was happening, they simply told me to hurry and come see. I couldn't help but smile at their childlike behavior.

At the spirits' urging, I hurried out of my room and onto the deck, looking around at the water surrounding us...to see it was full of flowers. That wasn't a metaphor; there was literally a blanket of pure white flowers covering the water around us.

At sea, the most prevalent colors were the blue of the water, the black of night, and the white of clouds. But now, the ocean itself was white. The bizarre sight caused something indescribable to well up within me. I felt overwhelmingly moved, enough to blow away any unease or suspicion I might have felt.

However, it seemed I was the only one who was having a positive experience, as the rest of the crew was running around the ship, pale with fear. The sails were full, and the ship gained speed as if to leave this sea of flowers behind as quickly as possible.

"What's wrong?" I asked Suin, who looked as pale as the rest of the crew but at least wasn't running around in a panic. Of course, as the captain, his hands were still full with giving orders, but it didn't seem like there was anyone else I could ask.

"Ah, you're up, Acer. As you can see...well, I guess if you're not a sailor, you wouldn't know what this means. These flowers, we call them Sea Snow flowers based on the color, are a kind of plant that grow far to the south, and only show up in the spring tide."

I tried to imagine what that meant...but I still couldn't figure out what exactly we were dealing with. It almost made me laugh. It was a great feeling to experience something so clearly showing me I had much more to learn about this world. There might have been whole forests under the sea, and another kind of Spiritual Tree I had never heard of before. Even the thought of that was starting to get me excited.

"Sometimes the flowers break off of the main plant and float this far north.

But damn, I've never heard of them appearing in numbers like this before."

It seemed that Suin considered these Sea Snow flowers to be a sign of bad luck. But why would that be? From what I could tell, the flowers weren't dangerous in any way. They had a faintly sweet smell about them, mixed in with the usual sea air, but they certainly weren't poisonous. As a high elf, even if it was my first time seeing them, there was no way I could mistake whether a plant was toxic or not.

But thinking over Suin's words, I realized something. He had said that, as seasoned a sailor as he was, he had never seen the flowers in such numbers, but maybe I knew why. Was it possible there were so many flowers specifically because I was here? Maybe the water spirits were in such a fervor because they wanted to show me this sight. In that case, despite growing so far away, the water spirits must have been responsible for gathering them all here.

"The flowers themselves aren't dangerous, but there's a kind of monster that quite likes them. A huge one, the kind that doesn't normally leave its own hunting grounds. They'll go anywhere to eat these, though."

As Suin spoke, the spirits warned me of something massive cutting straight through the water toward us. The spirits must have known the connection between the monster and the flowers...but there was no sign of any shame in them.

Well, I supposed that wasn't a surprise. Even a monster large enough to threaten a massive ship like this was tiny in the eyes of the spirits. They must have assumed that I, as a being similar to the spirits themselves, would view it as insignificant as well. But my being and power were on a totally different level from the spirits, of course. Something that big could still be a huge problem for me, especially considering the threat it posed to the boat I was sailing in. But asking the spirits to understand such things was bordering on absurd.

"I'm going to buy us some time. Once we're clear of the flowers, could you slow down the ship for me? I should be able to catch up."

After saying that, I kicked off the side of the ship and jumped down to the water below. Though I guess with the flowers all around us, I landed on a carpet of flowers rather than the surface of the water. In any case, the water spirits

were there to help me stand.

Normally, I would want to leave handling things at sea to Suin and his crew, but there was no way I could avoid getting involved in this, especially since the whole event had been caused because I was on board. It would be a challenge to catch up to the ship if it continued going at full speed, but I trusted Suin. He would wait for me once they made it out of the flowers. And I was sure he had just as much trust in me.

Once I was up close to them, I understood how the sweet fragrance of the flowers drew in the sea monster. Even I found the aroma pleasant.

The monster raised its head above the surface, revealing its form as an enormous, incredibly long snake. I guess “sea serpent” would be the right name for something like this.

I faced the approaching monster and drew my sword. I had no intention of killing it. It was only here to eat the flowers, and even if I were interested in hunting it, there was no way I could harvest its remains for meat or other materials here on the open ocean.

There was no reason to kill it, but I couldn’t let it damage the ship, so all I needed to do was buy some time. With the aid of the spirits, that wouldn’t be especially difficult. Compared to the wonderful display of flowers growing in the sea I had been gifted, it was a trivial amount of work.



Our ship faced no more serious obstacles after the sea serpent. We visited a number of islands to trade with along the way until we finally made it to the powerful coastal nation of Mintar. I had spent about a month on board. It had been a pretty dense month, and while I had come to love the ship and its crew, it was still time to say goodbye. I would board a new ship and head farther west, while Suin would fill his stores with more merchandise to bring back to the Ancient Gold Empire.

Suin agreed to help me make arrangements for the next leg of my voyage. Mintar was a bit of an economic powerhouse, so there were a fair number of ships heading from here to the center of the continent. He was recognized by the merchants here, so securing passage was well within his power.

Though he had said it would take a few days, I was quite grateful for his help. It would normally take a much longer layover to get transferred to another ship. I suppose my current journey had already stretched into a length of decades, so waiting a few days for a ship wasn't all that different from waiting a few months, but anything that got me home faster was something I was grateful for.

So, I ended up spending a few days in Mintar. It felt like too much time to sit around doing nothing, but not enough time to actually engage in something. The most I could do was go sightseeing around the port. The port here was quite large, so it would probably keep me entertained for a few days at the very least.

Unlike the people of the Great Grasslands who worshipped the natural world or the people of the Ancient Gold Empire who worshipped the dragon's guardian spirits and mystics, the people of Mintar worshipped gods of the wind and sea. Their places of worship were called temples rather than churches, but their social function seemed more or less the same as the church in the center of the continent. In short, it served by grounding faith for life from birth until death, handled basic education, and sought out children with talent in the Divine Arts.

In that light, the Child of Fire I had met in the Great Grasslands might have been in a bit of a dangerous position back then. His supernatural power, a pyrokinesis the people here would have recognized as a type of Divine Art, was quite powerful. If he had continued to run amok, the temple here might have put together a task force to deal with him. No matter how you approached the issue, a person who didn't believe in any god but possessed such powerful Divine Arts and used them to attack and plunder would be an affront to the temple here.

As organizations involved with finding and training children who possessed a talent for the Divine Arts, churches and temples possessed extensive knowledge of them. With Juyal making no efforts to keep his abilities a secret, a member of the temple would easily discern the nature of his pyrokinesis. No matter how powerful his abilities were, once their origin became known, it would be possible to take countermeasures against them. If more than one Divine Arts user were to confront him, especially any who were particularly effective

against pyrokinesis, Juyal would stand no chance. Considering his talent for the Divine Arts, they might not have killed him immediately...but I doubted he'd ever be granted any freedom.

Of course, that would have been the case for Juyal back when he wielded his power recklessly. As he was now, even someone with a plan to defeat his pyrokinesis wouldn't have an easy time taking him down. He had been quite devoted to learning swordsmanship, so at least as far as it came to dealing with his powers, there was no need to worry about him.

Besides, I suspected he had already brought an end to the Dahlian raids of the southern kingdoms. Walking through the streets of Mintar's port city, I found woolen sheets for sale that must have been acquired by trading with the nomads of the grasslands. The sight brought back all sorts of memories.

It felt odd to be getting pangs of nostalgia when I had only been gone from the grasslands for about a decade. My nostalgia led me to inquiring further about the grasslands, where I learned there were apparently big changes happening. A street merchant wouldn't know all that much, of course, but it appeared one of the large tribes was absorbing other tribes and gathering considerable power.

It sounded like a storm was brewing in the east, centered around the nomads there. Though the news left me a little uneasy, I knew Juyal, Zelen, and even Shuro had grown up into wonderful adults, so I was confident they'd make it through. If the children of wind and fire joined hands, they could weather any storm. Or perhaps it would be better to say that they'd start a storm all of their own.

That said, the emergence of a powerful new faction on the grasslands also carried the threat of both the southern kingdoms and the Ancient Gold Empire making a move against them, so I still felt a little worried.

Seeing miscellaneous goods lined up both from the Great Grasslands and the Ancient Gold Empire beside each other was interesting as well. There were also plenty of goods from other coastal and island kingdoms. Just looking at the goods for sale across the city made it feel like the decades I had spent in the East had barely scratched the surface of what lay here.

Besides Mintar, there were also other large coastal kingdoms like Skrolm, and I hadn't so much as stepped foot in Red Mountain Province in the empire. Suin had plenty of colorful language to describe Skrolm, but I imagined that was mostly because they were an economic rival. I wouldn't know the true nature of the place until I saw it for myself. Red Mountain Province apparently had a population of serpentfolk, as well as a kingdom of dwarves. There had also been plenty of tribes living on the Great Grasslands I'd never encountered.

Speaking of which, there were also the halflings and the fairies on the grasslands. I hadn't had much chance to encounter halflings yet, and while I had previously held no interest in the fairies, I had come to learn that fairy society wasn't as monolithic as it first seemed. There might have been some kind of change happening among them as well.

There were plenty of things I rushed past, numerous places I didn't visit...it felt like I was wasting opportunities, but I'd have plenty of chances to visit them again in the future. For an ordinary human, my journey around the eastern region of the continent would have been the odyssey of a lifetime. But for a high elf like me, things were different. Out of the thousand years allotted to me, the few decades I had spent here were only a drop in the bucket.



Watching the women twist and dance to the music, I reached for the plate of food on the sheet in front of me: steamed, minced fish, wrapped in a cylindrical bread-like shell and fried. Despite the unique sauce paired with it, you could easily eat it with your hands, and the flavor was pretty good too. After downing a mouthful, I followed it up by lifting a small pot of fruit juice to my mouth. The strong, sweet fluid slipped comfortably down to my stomach.

I glanced to the side to see Suin, who had brought me here, chatting happily with another merchant. He was treating me to a meal at this rather expensive-looking establishment as a show of gratitude and hospitality...but that was only half the story. The other half lay with the fact that bringing a unique guest like an elf around with him would bolster his reputation in the area, improving his position in Mintar. To be honest, if getting a free meal would help Suin in his endeavors, I was more than happy to oblige. I suspected he was also using the attention we were garnering to try and find a ship to take me farther west. This

would likely be my last chance to offer Suin something of value.

The next dish to arrive was a kind of fish cooked in oil, which you ate wrapped in a leafy vegetable. Mintari culture had produced a lot of food that could easily be eaten with your bare hands. The fact that expensive oils could be used in such huge amounts to cook food like this spoke of the luxury the people of Mintar lived in, even if this particular restaurant was on the higher end. The refreshing texture of deep-fried food in my mouth was matched with its distinctive flavor.

This food really was a luxury. I wanted to lose myself in the cooking, but if I didn't act with a certain level of decorum, it was Suin's reputation that would take the hit. Of course, if I remained too detached, the cooks, who were proud of their people's culture, would feel insulted. It felt like a chore, but I guess I'd have to put on a show of enjoying the food thoroughly while still maintaining a level of reservation.

The next day, though, I'd be sure to find a place where I could let loose. While I certainly could manage an environment like this, it wasn't exactly my ideal locale.

Resisting the urge to lick the oil from my fingers, I looked around to see other patrons wiping their hands on the cloth sheet in front of them, so I did the same. I had no idea whether this was the correct course of action, but it seemed to at least be better than licking my fingers.

I took another drink from my small pot. Apparently Mintari culture didn't have a habit of pairing alcohol with meals. It wasn't that alcohol itself was forbidden or anything, just that it was something that was enjoyed by people in the privacy of their own homes rather than out in public. It was likely a custom to avoid the sorts of trouble alcohol could bring, but the practice left me a little disappointed. The chaos, mistakes, and even sometimes fighting brought on by drinking was part of what I liked about it. Though perhaps that attitude was coming more from my inner dwarf than my life as a high elf.

Even so, the experience of coming into contact with such an entirely different culture was interesting. Experiences like these often led to feeling uneasy about local values and customs, but after taking the local climate and history into

consideration, you could reveal the hidden reasons behind all of them. What had led to alcohol being a private pleasure in Mintar? Maybe at one time, a past king had made a mistake after being openly drunk. Just trying to imagine what kind of situation had given rise to the custom was kind of fun.

My eyes happened to meet with one of the dancers. She was honestly gorgeous, unquestionably attractive. Each and every one of her movements drew the eyes of everyone around her. If I could find one thing to fault her on, it would be that it seemed she was dancing in a way that made herself stand out more, rather than being part of a united performance with the other dancers, though of course she was still in rhythm with them and the music.

That said, all of the dancers onstage were acting in the same way, struggling to make their individual charm shine above the others. I had heard from Suin that this was because customers could hire the dancers here to spend the night with them. Of course, simply throwing money at them wasn't enough. They also needed to offer presents and show the right attitude in order to win the girls' favor. With the level of importance Mintar treated its culture of dancing, professionals like these had quite a high standing in society. Taking a famous dancer as a wife was seen as a sign of extreme wealth.

Basically, it meant that a foreigner both in race and nationality like me was entirely outside of their system, and so could enjoy the dancing without any ulterior motives. As I applauded in admiration for her work, the dancer flashed a proud smile and continued her dance with even more passion.

If someone as famous as Suin were to act in the same way, it would threaten bringing certain expectations and envy from the dancers. It was clear Suin was intentionally avoiding looking at any one dancer more than the others, and was keeping his overall manner in check. But these were all problems I didn't have to deal with, so I could enjoy the food and dancing to my heart's content.

The last dish was fruit carved into incredible sculptures...the only dish that seemed like a waste to eat.



Once again, I was traveling the seas. Ever since leaving Fusou, I had spent a great deal of time on ships, and for the entire three days I spent in Mintar, it

had felt like the ground was swaying beneath me.

Maybe it was obvious, but traveling by ship came with many problems. First of all, because ships had to carry so much cargo, the amount of water in their stores was limited. It seemed a bit irrational, considering how the ship was always surrounded by water, but seawater and drinking water weren't the same thing.

I could ask the water spirits for fresh water whenever it suited me, but out of consideration for the thoughts and feelings of the people around me, I couldn't just casually bathe whenever I felt like it. The most I could do was get enough water to wipe myself down.

There was obviously no forge aboard the ship, so working steel was impossible. Blacksmithing had become my way of making money, but also a hobby. It was an inextricable part of my life. But the last time I had picked up a hammer had been during my stay in Fusou...that is to say, quite a while ago. My urge to create something was starting to grow. It wasn't unbearable yet, but the craving was certainly made worse by the fact that I couldn't do it on the ship. Maybe that was just a problem with my personality, though. Impossible things were impossible, after all.

However, just because I couldn't forge didn't mean I had no way to spend my time. When it came to practicing my swordsmanship, the constant motion of the ship beneath my feet provided me with a rare challenge I could never find on land. Even standing still required me to focus on keeping myself centered, making me conscious of my movements as I swung my sword in entirely new ways. It was surprisingly fun practice.

Besides that, listening to the wind blowing past me and the waves lapping against the side of the ship brought all sorts of interesting stories to my ears from the spirits. The spirits in the sea told me of the movements of large schools of small fish, or the large predators that hunted them. The spirits in the wind taught me about the lives of people living on distant islands, or the birds flying over the waves. Of course, these stories all came from the perspective of the spirits, so they were vague and abstract. But for some reason, that made them all the more charming and fun to listen to.

As restricted as I was on this voyage, I was still enjoying it.

As I said before, though, I was also getting a craving to go hunting. I really wanted to invest myself in enjoying the prize of freshly downed game. That might have been a very strange impulse for a high elf, but I was a strange high elf, so I doubt it would be much of a surprise to anyone.

I had started getting a little tired of salted meat and fish. One of the challenges of life at sea was getting access to fresh fruit and vegetables, the lack of which threatened scurvy. While it certainly existed in this world, it was known as “Sailor’s Plague,” and was feared all the more due to the lack of knowledge of its origins. But even with the cause of Sailor’s Plague being a mystery to them, the people here still understood that fresh fruit and vegetables could fend it off, so while access to food like that was difficult on long voyages, they always ate them in abundance whenever reaching port.

The issue with meat was entirely one of culinary preference. Especially in port towns, the most popular food near the ocean was always fish, meaning most meals centered around it even when we were on land. All there was to do was bear with it for a little longer.

Once I returned to land, I’d take the opportunity to visit a forest. I didn’t want something light and generic like poultry or crocodile meat, but the strong and distinct meat of a monster, even if it was strangely flavored like that of a greedboar. Getting the chance to put my skills with a bow to work again would also be fun.

Suin had set me up with a ship leaving Mintar that was part of a larger fleet. The fleet had been organized by the kingdom itself, meaning I was on board what was effectively a military vessel. It felt a bit strange to be on a ship that was both a military and trade ship at the same time, but now that I thought about it, I had already had a close enough brush with a ship that was both a military and pirate vessel, so it was a bit late to be complaining.

Among the fleet were some warships brought as an escort. Never mind monsters, most ships from other nations wouldn’t bother a fleet of this size, so there was little risk of running into trouble on the seas. A fleet of any size would

still run into trouble if they found themselves in the middle of a storm, but that wouldn't be an issue while I traveled with them.

The fleet traveled under a warm—or more accurately, quite hot—sun as it sailed effortlessly across the ocean. This was the easiest voyage of my journey so far, but for some reason, that made me feel like something was missing. The thrill of a journey fraught with danger, and its attendant exhilaration, was entirely absent.

Stopping in ports along the way to restock food and supplies, the fleet spent a month traveling around the Man-Eating Swamp and into the center of the continent.

We reached a port on the southern edge of the Azueda Alliance, in a country known as Dolbogarde. Though not to the same scale as the Vilestorika Republic, Dolbogarde still had a thriving trade relationship with the eastern region of the continent. Well, Vilestorika maintained a trade relationship with other continents too, so when it came to sea trade, they really were on an entirely different level.

The fleet I traveled with was ultimately headed for Vilestorika as well, but I decided to disembark here in Dolbogarde. The situation in the center of the continent seemed to have gone through quite some changes in the decades I had been gone, so I wanted to walk through them and see them with my own eyes.

It would slow down my return to visit Kaeha a bit, but at long last, I had returned to the center of the continent. Even if I was a bit delayed, or even took a few extra years to make it home, it made little difference. She had always waited for me, so a little more waiting wouldn't bother her in the least.



I had never visited them before, but the region south of the Azueda Alliance consisted of three countries. Dolbogarde was situated in the center of the three. To the east was Siglair, and to its west was Radlania. There was also one small island nation off the southern coast, but that wasn't important for now.

Dolbogarde, Siglair, and Radlania weren't especially large countries, but they were very distinct from each other. As I had mentioned before, Dolbogarde was

deeply involved in trade with the East. Though not to the same scale as Vilestorika, it still had a powerful influence on the circulation of goods through the nations around it.

Siglair sat on the edge of the Man-Eating Swamp, and so boasted a powerful military to combat the monsters emerging from it. In that way, it was quite similar to its northern neighbors, Bardoth and Ortenon. That aside, it was also famous for the production of marble. Considered to be a gift from the harvest god, marble was treated with special reverence by the church, so exporting the stone had become a significant part of Siglair's economy. Naturally, it also produced craftsmen who excelled in architecture and sculpting.

The largest consumer of the marble they produced was the last of the three, Radlania. It was the smallest of these three nations, but also the most influential, as it housed the main headquarters of the religious organization devoted to the god of the harvest worshipped across the entire central region of the continent. Radlania wasn't ruled by royalty or nobility, but by priests and a pope. The country's management was funded by the donations of believers, so—at least on the surface—it didn't levy any taxes on its people. It was a rather hard system for me to wrap my head around.

I disembarked in Dolbogarde, as it seemed like the best place for me to begin my observation of the new state of the center of the continent. Being a logistical center made it not only a central point for goods to gather but also for people, and those people brought information with them.

In that case, you might argue that a stronger economic power like Vilestorika would have served me better...but it seemed Vilestorika was currently embroiled in war, meaning it would be hard to gain any information from an objective point of view. So as the second largest trade nation in the region, Dolbogarde was best suited as a vantage point from which to view the rest of the area.

The war in question had been brought about by Zieden, the nation formed by the merger of Zaints and Jidael. The two smaller nations had a long history of conflict with Ludoria and the Azueda Alliance, so the new country born from their merger had been regarded with considerable caution by its neighbors.

When I left the center of the continent, I vaguely remembered Ludoria had been in the process of building fortresses to reinforce its borders, while the Alliance had been bolstering its military.

The reason Zaints and Jidael gave for their merger was to better aid in defense against the raids coming from their northern neighbor, Darottei. Anyone would have guessed that Zieden would have turned its sights on them, or one of their other two old foes. But for some reason, it had instead marched its armies south, into the Duchy of Kirkoim.

Kirkoim had been on friendly terms with all nations in the center of the continent, maintaining a neutrality that helped to stabilize relationships throughout the region. Naturally, that included Zaints and Jidael, so the invasion had been a shock to everyone, catching the Duchy entirely unprepared. At the same time, Darottei began a large-scale invasion of the Alliance, leading to the fall of North Zaile, the northern wall protecting the rest of the Alliance.

There must have been some sort of secret pact between Zieden and Darottei, as the latter's actions prevented the Alliance from intervening in the war between the former and Kirkoim. At the same time, Ludoria had mired themselves down, waiting in their fortresses for aggression aimed at them, and so were unable to move swiftly in response.

In almost no time at all, a full half of Kirkoim had fallen to Zieden's advance. With half of their territory lost, Kirkoim turned to Vilestorika for aid. The Republic had made an obvious show of trying to decouple territorial strength with national power, as shown by their treatment of Gaiatica, the remains of what had once been the nation of Paulogia.

At this rate, Kirkoim would have been entirely overrun by Zieden, with Vilestorika next in line. For the sake of their own survival, Kirkoim submitted itself to becoming a vassal state of Vilestorika in exchange for their protection. In simple terms, the situation had become a stare down between the newly formed Zieden and Vilestorika with its two vassal states.

Caught between these two warring sides, Ludoria couldn't remain silent. Making enemies of both would isolate them, leading to an inevitable slow

decline. At the same time, voices within the Azueda Alliance were starting to call for a reformation of the Azueda Empire in order to put down the aggression from Darottei. In effect, that would mean the dissolution of the Alliance's many city-states to form a single, larger nation.

As the religious center of the region, Radlania earnestly called for an end to the conflict, but their efforts had yet to bear fruit. Or, perhaps, the existence of voices calling for peace was what led to the conflict escalating to this point in the first place.

That was how the familiar and yet now foreign center of the continent had turned out in my absence.



The city I arrived at in Dolbogarde, known as Neldania, was situated where the river flowing south from the Alliance emptied into the sea. Apparently planned from its inception, the city had been built around its harbor, fanning out inland around the river. Multiple large canals were built off of the main river, with smaller channels connecting them.

As such, the main form of transportation in the aquatic city was by boat. The boatmen who led them were surprisingly well-informed. Beyond just the people of Neldania, merchants, travelers, and even adventurers often made use of the boats to get around. Having contact with so many different kinds of people, the waterways became a breeding ground for rumors.

On top of that, the boatmen likely exchanged information among themselves as well. That was the conclusion I reached after spending about two weeks in Neldania, at which point almost every boatman I encountered already knew about me. They had probably shared that an elven stranger was asking around for information about the region.

In truth, getting information from the boatmen went far, far smoother than any attempt I had made in the past to gather information by visiting bars. The money I traded for information from the boatmen was considerably less than what I spent treating people to drinks in the past and got me considerably better information too.

I was quite thankful for that, but it also taught me a newfound respect for the

boatmen. They had open access to plenty of information both about the situation within the city and outside of it, enough for all of them to be well-informed about me after only two weeks. At the same time the boatmen served as legs for the people of the city, they also served as the city's eyes and ears.

With legs, eyes, and ears, I had to assume the city also had a head somewhere as well. There had to be someone organizing the boatmen, collecting the information they gathered and putting it to use. Whether that was the official ruler of the city, a powerful and influential merchant, or some underground organization, I couldn't say yet. If I had been interested in spending any length of time in the city, I likely would have taken an interest in this person.

I had felt something similar to this before... Ah, probably from my experience in Saurotay, the city in Vilestorika. It seemed Dolbogarde and Vilestorika shared more in common than just benefiting from sea trade. The brightness of a prosperous society was matched by the darkness of those who maintained it in the shadows. The strength of humans was matched by their ability to inspire fear.

I felt one of the strengths of the human race was born from its limited life expectancy. The shorter a race's life span, the quicker they matured and reproduced. But humans still had plenty of time to learn new skills, refine them, and pass them down to their successors. In short, it felt to me like the length of the human life cycle was positioned perfectly for future development.

Another strength they possessed was their limited social consciousness. As far as I knew, the most socially integrated of all the races was probably the fairies. Even without going to such extremes, elves were considerably more socially bound than humans were, not counting rare outliers like the elven caravan and me. That led to change coming slowly to them.

Human social structures were much less involved, leading to the development of many varied societies that could adapt flexibly in the short term. They didn't live entirely separately, but they did not have a particularly strong sense of harmony, coming into frequent conflict with others of their own race. That led to their own prosperity and made experiencing the societies they created stimulating and exciting.

The juxtaposition of light and darkness in humanity that was on display in Vilestorika and here in Dolbogarde was symbolic of their strength as a race.

Two weeks after I arrived in Neldania, I left the city behind, walking north into the Alliance. The normal method of traveling would be to take a boat up the river, and as I had experienced many times by now, walking on my own two feet would take considerably longer than taking a boat.

But in the end, I chose to walk anyway. I had two reasons.

The first was the desire to go hunting that I'd been nursing since I first started traveling by ship. For a high elf like myself, walking a wild, untamed forest was as easy as walking down a well-maintained highway. I could find myself in the forests simply by diverting slightly off the main roads to the Alliance, and the experience of spending my days surrounded by trees would be a good way to keep my thoughts and feelings in order.

The second reason was that a boat would take me north, all the way to Lake Tsia. I would end up in either Folka or Luronte. A boat from Luronte could take me to the magic city of Odine, but even if I chose another path, the rivers leading off of Lake Tsia could take me more or less anywhere in the Alliance. That was what made the river route the most popular.

But I had already decided where I wanted to go first in the Alliance. There wasn't any particular meaning behind my decision. When I had left on my journey to the East, though, I had avoided this place. Unable to bear the thought of stopping there, I had hurried past.

But now, with all the changes faced by the Alliance, or rather the changes it was in the middle of facing now, if I was going to be reacquainted with the Alliance, that was the first place I wanted to see.

The Duchy of Travoya, the city of Janpemon. Was that stone ship still afloat in the sea of wheat? There wouldn't be any humans I recognized still alive there, but even so, I wanted to revisit that city for myself before I went anywhere else in the Alliance.

Chapter 3 — Changing and Unchanging, Part One

I traveled north and west, following the roads, occasionally dipping into the forests, crossing over rivers, and then joining back up with the roads. It was the first time in a while I had traveled over land. I kept myself fed from edible plants I happened across, the occasional bit of nectar from flowers I saw, fruit I plucked off wild trees...and of course, game I hunted myself. I sometimes spent days cooling the meat I hunted by the small rivers I encountered. I wasn't in a hurry in the least.

This joy of absolute freedom was something I could never experience while traveling on a ship. The sea had its own sort of freedom to it, but in the end I was just being carried from one place to another. When walking on my own two feet, I could choose to move forward or stop. I could choose how fast to walk or run, which made it more fun for some reason. When I happened across small villages in my travels, I'd trade some of the meat I had hunted for salt and continue on my way, keeping a relaxed pace.

The journey from Neldania, the largest port in Dolbogarde, to the city of Janpemon in Travoya took about a month and a half on foot. Since I was really taking it slow, it was more like two months for me. Eventually, I came across fields of wheat. This wasn't quite the best season to be seeing ripe grain, but the scenery still inspired something of a nostalgia in me.

However...on the edge of the scene stood a structure I didn't remember. West of Janpemon, just beyond the wheat fields, an imposing fortress stood in land that should have been empty. Ah, I supposed Kirkoim lay in that direction. The northern half of Kirkoim had been conquered by Zieden, while the southern half had submitted to the rule of Vilestorika.

If you headed west from Janpemon, you would probably land right on the border of that conflict. That put Janpemon, a city abundant with valuable food, very close to the front lines. The chances that one or both of the warring states would set their eyes on the resources here was...not small, to say the least.

Even if they never attacked, it was almost certain that bands of robbers and bandits would start forming from deserters and mercenaries too scared to remain in the conflict. A fortress or two was absolutely necessary. Even I could understand that.

But it didn't make the shadow those fortresses would cast over the wonderful sight of Janpemon during the harvest season any less unfortunate.

For the first time in quite a while, I was able to use my master blacksmith license as identification to enter the city. The guards were a bit shocked to see the date it was issued, though, as I had received it over sixty years ago. Counting from the day I left the forest behind, it had been over seventy years. Though perhaps it would be better to say "only seventy years," considering everything I had experienced in my adventures. It was kind of a strange feeling.

The gate guards were surprised by how old my license was, but upon seeing I was an elf, they didn't cause any fuss. In fact, they treated me suspiciously well, letting me into the city with no issue. Considering the huge fortress, I had expected entering would be a hassle, so this was almost a disappointment. In the end, it was still convenient for me, so I wasted no time getting into the city and following the old streets in my memories.

Janpemon had always been an old city, so while the streets had undergone some repairs in my absence, not a lot had changed. Many houses were just as I had remembered them, while others had been torn down and rebuilt, leaving the cityscape before me slightly different from the one in my memories. I noticed the biggest change when I arrived at the inn that had been run by Nonna's family.

Of course, Nonna wouldn't still be here, nor would her parents who had run the place. But even aside from that, the inn itself had undergone a dramatic change in appearance. Nonna's inn had been moderately priced, with great food and cozy rooms, but the place in front of me now was a high-class hotel, easily twice...no, three times its previous size. At first I hesitated, not sure if I should even visit...but if I didn't, there wouldn't have been much point in coming to Janpemon at all.

Even if Nonna wasn't here anymore, my memories of this city were still of the comfort of this inn, the great food we had eaten here, and the warm kindness Nonna and the other people here had shown us. If the inn had undergone such a drastic change, I wanted to know more about why, and whether I should be celebrating or lamenting it.

Steeling myself, I stepped inside, to be immediately struck by a loud shout.

"Welcome! Ah, it's an elf! Moooom! There's an elf here! We have an elf visiting!"

The loud, innocent voice of a young girl shouting didn't feel like it suited such a high-class establishment, but that honestly made me feel relieved. The girl, smiling brightly as she called for her mother, couldn't have been much more than eight years old. She was a bit smaller than Nonna when I had first met her, but looked so much like her that I couldn't help but feel like I had stepped back in time. There was no doubt in my mind this girl was a direct relative of hers. Considering the life expectancy of humans, I supposed she would be her great-granddaughter? That would make her mother Nonna's granddaughter.

"Aina, you're being rude to the guest! I'm sorry, welcome to...umm, my apologies, but you wouldn't happen to be Mr. Acer, would you?" Answering her daughter's call, the woman who seemed to own the inn came to the front and immediately stared at me in wide-eyed shock. Confused by the question, I nevertheless nodded, earning a huge smile from her. "My apologies. You looked so much like the man in the stories my grandmother told me, so I thought... Welcome, Mr. Acer. We have long been awaiting your visit."



I was led to a private room where the lady currently managing the inn told me her story. Her name was Sheyne and she was Nonna's granddaughter. Apparently the reason the inn had grown so large came back to Airena and the elven caravan.

At around the same time I had left on my journey east, the elven caravan had visited Janpemon. That would have been to deliver my letter to Nonna. They had decided to make this inn their regular place to stay whenever they were in the city. It was common for caravans to stay at inns when visiting cities, but the

fact they had chosen this one in particular for all of their nights in Janpemon had pushed the local lord to work. I'm sure Airena had done it on purpose.

After all, the elven caravan wasn't just for trade; they also served as ambassadors for the entire elven race. To the lord of Janpemon, who was also the duke of Travoya, the requests of the caravan were like official political exchanges between the elves and the human kingdoms. It had become a diplomatic affair. As a result, the lord of Janpemon needed to protect the inn at all costs. The inn had been facing some kind of trouble at the time, so Airena chose to bring the lord of the city to its defense. That had made for a much smoother conclusion than if Airena had tried to solve the problem by herself, and it had led to the inn receiving long-term protection.

I really had to give it to her. I didn't think anyone but Airena would be capable of coming up with such a clever solution. As a skilled adventurer, she had learned how to deal with humans, and with her experience acting as an ambassador to the human kingdoms for the elves, there was little doubt she'd spent more time among humans than any other elf. I had spent a long time living in the human world, but even with my faint memories of a past life as a human, I doubted even I would compare to her ability to negotiate and show discernment.

I would likely have tried to resolve the situation with force, or stand guard at the inn myself until the trouble had passed. I could only say I was glad the elven caravan had visited at that time. Of course, they had only been there to help in my and Win's stead.

As rumors spread of the elven caravan favoring this particular inn, many people came to see what set it apart, and this led to a huge boost in the number of guests. In order to accommodate the new business, the inn had expanded to what I saw today. Considering how good the food they served was, even if it had been a gimmick that brought customers here to start, they would have no problem holding those customers for a long time. It was no surprise to me that the inn flourished.

The great environment Nonna and her parents had created here had been recognized by the many new guests that came. Now that I thought about it, the fact that the elven caravan visited here regularly had probably played a part in

how easily I had made it through the gates into the city. I didn't know how much of this was also part of Airena's plan, but I was quite happy to see the results of her work in Janpemon.

"My grandmother was always telling us stories of you and little Win...ah, I suppose he's older than me though, isn't he? But that's how she always talked about him. In any case, she very much admired you," Sheyne said as she poured some tea. Ah, so that was how she had recognized me without ever having met me. I had told Nonna in the end that I was a high elf, but it seemed Sheyne didn't know.

The tea cakes served alongside the tea matched perfectly, having a consistency that was firm but not hard, and carrying a full flavor from the butter baked into it. Tea hadn't been all that common when I last visited the Alliance, but now it was being served not only like it was natural and common, but with appropriately matching snacks and everything. It was a strange sight.

I noticed the young girl I met watching me from a distance. It was Sheyne's daughter, Nonna's great-granddaughter...if I recalled, her name was Aina. Apparently curious about this elf she didn't recognize, the way she stared bashfully from afar was honestly adorable. It made me want to invite her over and share the snacks with her, but that would just get her yelled at by her mother later.

As much as the inn had preserved its relaxed atmosphere from my last visit, teaching this girl to beg for handouts from customers wouldn't do her any favors. That said, I highly doubted my leftover cakes would be served to other guests, so there was a good chance they'd end up with Aina anyway. So I made sure to leave some behind and focused on enjoying the tea instead.

A pleasant feeling of nostalgia filled my heart. I was really glad I had come. When I had first set off on my journey to the East, I hadn't been ready to accept losing more people I cared about, like Nonna and Kawshman. But now, things were different.

I couldn't be sure just how much I had changed in the decade or so I had been gone. I had seen many things, thought through many things, and felt like I had

gained much, but from my perspective, I didn't feel like I had changed significantly.

But I suppose that's how things went. As small a step as it might have been, I was sure I had taken at least one step forward. Out of my thousand-year life span, that's about as much as I could hope for in only a decade or so. What mattered was that I could now accept that feeling of loss I had been afraid of back then.

When I had first left for my journey east, I probably could have met Nonna one last time while she was still alive, but I had chosen not to. There was nothing to be gained from regretting that choice now.

I glanced over to Aina and gave her a smile, prompting the young girl to blush and patter away. Though she had been quite energetic and assertive when she first met me, after calming down somewhat, she had grown quite a bit more bashful. It seemed she'd decided to avoid me for now.

I wanted to enjoy my stay here and take some time to visit Nonna's grave, so I would probably be staying for a week or two. I might also consider staying a bit longer to get some blacksmithing in. Would Aina take a liking to me within that time? I thought it would be wonderful if we could go out for some fruit tarts like I had done with her great-grandmother.



I walked down the streets of Janpemon, humming to myself. I might have been in somewhat of a good mood after learning that the food at Nonna's inn—or rather, Sheyne and Aina's inn—was just as good as I remembered it. Of course, there were some minor changes due to there being different cooks, but it wasn't anything to complain about. Being able to come back here and taste food that was almost exactly the same as I remembered it made me unbelievably happy.

Which, to be quite honest, surprised me. After all, experiencing the soba in Fusou hadn't created such a strong feeling in me. Though, perhaps that was to be expected. Even with memories of a past life, I was a completely different person now than I was then. Rather than obsessing over the foods of my past life, I was enjoying the experiences of this one. In short, I was quite content.

Putting aside that for now, my current good mood was carrying me to Janpemon's blacksmithing guild. After experiencing the nostalgic food at the inn, I was really in the mood to knock out a couple blacksmithing jobs.

I noticed a fair number of gazes turn my way as I walked through the city. Janpemon was a rather prosperous city, so the general reception to visitors was usually welcome instead of hostile. But compared to the old Janpemon that I knew, there was quite a bit more unease in the faces I walked past. With the conflict in Kirkoim being so close by, it was only natural that people here would be worried about getting dragged into the conflict between two large countries.

Of course, if the Alliance banded together and fought, they'd probably be just as strong as Vilestorika or Zieden, but as a collection of associated city-states, the military power of the Alliance was spread out over a large area. Even if the Alliance decided to gather all its forces in Janpemon to protect it, doing so would take considerable time. That went for the movement of troops as much as it did for navigating the red tape required to make such a decision.

That was the greatest weakness of the Azueda Alliance. Zieden would definitely be able to take advantage of it if they declared war on the Alliance. They had already shown they were able to mobilize quite quickly in their invasion and capture of the northern half of Kirkoim. Their hands were full with Vilestorika at the moment, but that conflict couldn't last forever.

There was no guarantee of a future here for Janpemon. That was what gave rise to the calls for the rebirth of the Azueda Empire. More precisely, they were calls for uniting the city-states so that their military power could be wielded swiftly and effectively. It was only natural that the citizens would call for the country to take action to protect their daily lives. However, the powerful nation they were hoping for might end up threatening the lives of those in other countries, should its interests turn outward.

As I was lost in thought, I made it to the familiar stone building that housed the blacksmithing guild. When it came to the revival of the Azueda Empire, there was nothing I could say or do. As much as I loved Janpemon, I was nothing but a visitor here. The people who lived here would have to decide on the future for themselves. That said, even an outsider could be trusted to make one

or two good weapons for the city.

With that thought in mind, I knocked on the door. As expected, the face that greeted me was entirely unfamiliar.

“Welcome to the blacksmithing guild. What brings you here today? Oh, you’re a blacksmith? Wait, and an elf...you wouldn’t happen to be...?”

When I showed her my master blacksmith license, the young woman’s face changed from a welcoming smile to surprise. It seemed she knew who I was. How could that be? I couldn’t imagine this girl was *also* one of Nonna’s grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

“I’m a traveling blacksmith. My name is Acer. I was hoping to borrow a forge and take on a little work. I’ve been allowed to use the forge here in the past,” I said, looking around the building. It hadn’t changed one bit. My first visit to this place, and my return a year and a half later with Win in tow, had both been decades ago.

At my request, the woman’s face brightened again. “Yes, we have heard of you. There have been legends passed down from the guildmaster of some generations ago, of an elven blacksmith who might someday come back to visit us! I’ll take you to the forge right away!” Excitedly jumping up from her seat, she grabbed a key and led me away.

But wait...“legends”? That word really put the amount of time I had been gone into perspective. I wondered if the old guildmaster she had referred to was the man who had helped me back then. He had been quite good at finding work for me, so I imagined he had gone on to do well for himself. I would feel quite honored if he had remembered me for all that time.

Despite the years that had passed since my last visit, the forge I was guided to had been kept in good repair and was still very usable. It had been quite some time since I had done any blacksmithing work.

What would the blacksmithing guild have me doing now? As my heart started dancing with excitement, I ignited the forge, happy to reunite with the same fire spirits that had lived here so long ago.



“Hmm...”

I held up the short sword blade I had just finished, inspecting it at various angles. It seemed my skills as a blacksmith, or perhaps my sensitivity to metal, had dulled somewhat after all. Well, I suppose the last time I had worked any metal was back when I was staying in Outo. Since then, I'd left to see the Fusou Tree, then immediately boarded a ship to return to the center of the continent, so quite a bit of time had passed. I guess I should have expected that spending so much time on a swaying ship and not being able to so much as touch a hammer would mess with my skills.

As far as the quality of this particular sword went... I supposed it was technically good enough. But even so—or perhaps specifically for that reason—I couldn't accept it, and decided to try again. If I sold this sword as it was, I would definitely come to regret it once my sense for blacksmithing returned just a few pieces later. If that day came and I decided I wanted to fix this one, it would be too late.

If it had been really bad, the blacksmithing guild wouldn't have accepted it in the first place...but although it might sound arrogant, even this piece was better than what you'd find in your average shop. The skills I had picked up on my journey east had made me a much better smith than before, and the spirits in the forge here were already quite accustomed to my quirks. I just wasn't in great shape at the moment. So right now was the only chance I'd have to choose to start this sword over. I couldn't lie to myself.

The blacksmithing guild had three jobs for me. The first was the mass production of swords and spears for the soldiers manning the fortress. The second was the familiar job of creating an example piece for use in teaching the other smiths. The third was to make a showpiece to give as a present to the duke of Travoya.

I was told to take whichever I liked, so I settled on the first for now. Going all out to make an example piece or a showpiece to present to the duke were interesting jobs in their own ways, but what this city needed most right now was equipment for their soldiers. Being a mass production job, I couldn't fuss too much over the steel I had available, nor could I spend a lot of time on each individual piece. The size and shape were all predetermined, so there was only

so much craftsmanship I could put into it.

In the end, the quality of the piece was heavily limited by these conditions, but I still wanted to turn out the best possible work I could within those constraints. The soldiers of Janpemon would be entrusting their lives to these weapons.

Of course, having a good-quality weapon played only a small part in whether a soldier lived or died. To a degree, it was almost irrelevant. But if I could make a weapon that would endure where others might break, it might save that soldier's life. And if I made not one weapon but ten, and not ten weapons but a hundred, then the chances of that happening would slightly improve.

Luckily, I could work fairly quickly. That was thanks to my teacher, Oswald, who had always worked quickly himself. Even if the first one, two, or even three swords I turned out were scrap, if I could get it right on the fourth one, I'd still have plenty of time to make up for what had been spent on the failures. Once I had made a good number of weapons for the soldiers, I could then think of turning my attention to the other requests.

That second job, creating another example piece using every shred of skill I could muster, was especially appealing. Compared to the last time I had taken that job, I was sure that I was much improved...or at least I would be, once I got back into the swing of things.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I breathed a heavy sigh and got to work reforging the sword I had just made. The sound of the bellows feeding fresh air into the forge and the ring of the hammer striking hot steel all served to shake off the rust from my senses.

Sharper, ever sharper.

The sun eventually set, and I had to set aside my tools and clean up. Exchanging a few words with the receptionist from earlier, I headed back to the inn. It felt like I had slipped right back into my old habits. If I was working on something that absolutely had to be done, I could spend the night in the forge, but it was worth taking a break when I had the chance.

There were times when immersing myself exhaustively in the work felt like it

improved my focus, but that was mostly an illusion. The more I tired myself out, the harder the work became and the less I could bring myself to pay attention to what was going on around me, giving the impression that my focus was improving. Whether I was actually focusing well or just felt like it due to fatigue would come out quite strongly in the quality of my finished piece. No matter how the process felt, the results never lied. That was yet another lesson I had learned from my master, Oswald.

Even dwarves, a race famed for their endurance, lost efficiency if they kept working for extended periods of time. For someone like me who could never hope to match their stamina, being able to resist the urge to work “just a little longer” and cut myself off was an important and necessary skill, and part of what made me a good blacksmith.

A gentle, comforting breeze blew through the twilit streets of Janpemon. The smell of food cooking wafted out of the stone buildings painted red by the sunset, making my stomach growl. As much as I had enjoyed seeing new people and new things every day during my journey east, this slow-paced lifestyle was also a thing of joy for me.



Blacksmithing was a lot of fun. Working something solid like metal into a new shape with your own hands, giving it form and function, was never boring. The joy of making something good, and of having others look at what you’ve done and praise you for it, couldn’t be beat. On top of all of that, you got paid for it too.

I had recently been able to work the forge to my heart’s content, but that wasn’t the real reason I had come to Janpemon. I forced myself to take a day off once every seven days, so on my first such holiday, I was walking hand in hand with Aina on my way to a hill on the outskirts of the city. She had already shown quite an interest in me when we first met, so when I came home from my blacksmithing work with presents for her a few times, she grew attached to me surprisingly quickly.

Honestly, winning her over was so easy I was a bit worried. That said, I remembered Nonna being pretty quick to latch on to a new “friend” with open

pockets too, so maybe it just ran in the family.

We were heading to the graveyard where the people of Janpemon were laid to rest. Sheyne had offered to take me here first, but with the inn being in her care, it wasn't easy for her to take time away from it. When I had told her I was familiar with Janpemon and could find the way if she told me generally where it was, Aina jumped into the conversation and offered to take me there herself.

The cheerful way she walked through the streets, like we were headed out on a picnic, helped soften my heart. It was a much better experience than being guided in solemn quiet out of some misplaced consideration for me.

From the hill where the graveyard was placed, you could see the whole area of Janpemon surrounded by the fields of wheat that had just begun to glitter gold, ready for harvest. It seemed the graveyard had been built here so that the people laid to rest could watch over the city, or perhaps because it was just the best view around. A gentle wind blew past, caressing our faces.

"The wind calls the clouds, the clouds scatter rain about the land.

The damp earth gives birth to wheat, which grows into a shimmering, golden sea waving in the wind.

A stone ship floats in that sea of gold, by the name of Janpemon.

The city of wheat, beloved of the wind, water, and earth.

Carried forth by that beauty, it will certainly last forever..."

I sang to myself an old poem, written by a poet named Rajena Bogata, that had been arranged into a song by the elven minstrel Huratio.

"Oh, hey! I know that one!" Aina shouted happily, pulling at my hand. It seemed Huratio was still singing for the elven caravan. I would have to meet up with them again somewhere.

Nonna's grave wasn't particularly special, so without Aina's help it would have taken me quite some time to find it.

"And beside it is Great-Grandpa."

Patting Aina on the head, I offered a quiet prayer for Nonna and her husband

whom I had never met. What kind of life had she led? What kind of man had she married?

When I first met her, she had been a child. It was a strange feeling, seeing her grave here, knowing she had lived a full, natural life. Now, I was standing in front of it with her great-granddaughter. Someday, she would be laid to rest here, just like her great-grandmother. Of course, that was a far, distant worry for Aina, who was still but a child, but for me it felt quite close. That was something I had grown used to at this point, though.

“Mr. Acer, were you friends with Great-Grandma?” Aina asked me after I had finished praying.

I nodded and patted her head again. “Yes, we were friends. We went out and ate tarts together, and talked about all sorts of things.”

When I had first met Nonna, she was still young enough that I could pat her head like this. She had been adorable. The next time we met, she had grown into a dependable young woman, and had helped me in all kinds of ways. No matter how much she had grown, though, she always loved her sweets.

It was too far removed for me to be shedding any tears about, but thinking back on my time with her struck a sentimental chord. As I dealt with those feelings, Aina clamped her hands around mine, still resting on her head.

“Okay! I’ll go eat tarts with you in her place, then!” she laughed. Her carefree smile brought a smile out of me as well. I was sure that the offer came almost entirely from a desire to just eat tarts, but I was sure there was some small part of her that offered it out of courtesy for me. I guess I would have to accept the offer, though in moderation.

I could really feel that Aina had inherited a lot from her great-grandmother. Nonna had been a bit older when we’d first met, though, so she had been a bit better at dealing with customers. Aina’s relative youth, and its attendant innocence, really struck my heart.

“Carried forth by that beauty, it will certainly last forever...”

Huratio might have penned those words as an offer of consolation, but at least for now, that beauty had yet to come to an end. Even if it wasn’t to last

forever, I was happy to see it, and hoped it would continue for a long time yet.



Out in the morning fog, I swung my sword with a focus on controlling my breathing. I wasn't trying to cut the mist, but rather the tiny droplets of water that hung within it. Naturally, that was quite a challenge. It was certainly far more difficult than I could manage as I was now.

I was sure it was something Kaeha could do, though. She might have not had the sharp senses of a high elf, but I expected she could see those tiny water droplets and cut them apart nonetheless. In that case, I needed to reach that point myself someday.

It had been over ten years since Kaeha's death. I think I had at least made some small progress in approaching her skill level. But after over ten years, I still had so much farther to go.

Maybe because of my visit to Nonna's grave, I had been feeling rather sentimental lately. I was starting to feel the urge to drop everything and run back to Kaeha's grave in Ludoria. There was no need for me to rush, but I couldn't help the feeling.

I focused on my sword, trying to shut out all other thoughts. Little by little, swing by swing, I stretched for that distant ideal. The distance was at once both painful and wonderful. And beyond all that, swinging a sword like this was simply fun.

As I noticed someone approaching, I stopped with one last swing. No one I didn't recognize would come up to this rooftop. The rooftop hadn't been so spacious on my previous visit, but with the inn's expansion, there was a lot more laundry that needed to be dried. That said, there wasn't that much laundry being done so early in the morning, so I was able to borrow the space for my training.

Still frozen in my follow-through, I glanced over to see Aina peeking at me. She was up strangely early. Had she been woken up by a nightmare? I thought of calling out to her, but if I did so, she might worry she had interrupted me. I decided it was better to keep training for a bit before talking with her.

And so I started swinging again, carefully controlling my hands and breathing. Then, without changing my stance, I spun around and swung behind me with as little movement as possible. Then to the right, and to the left, in four directions, then eight. Each of those careful swings was sharp as expected, so I turned forward and swung again.

I aimed for the quiet power that Kaeha had shown in her swordsmanship. I couldn't let my multidirectional slashes fall behind my careful, single-directional ones. Even without taking a stance, without preparing herself, Kaeha could strike in any direction with the same lethal force.

My body was dripping, though I couldn't say if it was from sweat or the morning fog. What did my audience think about my swordsmanship? Was my swordsmanship good enough to inspire any feeling in them? I swung one last time, trying to cut through the nightmare that had brought Aina up here, if that indeed was what had awoken her.

Finished with my training for now, I didn't even have time to turn around before Aina ran to my side.

"That was awesome, Mr. Acer! It was all like, 'WHOOSH!'" Her eyes were positively glowing. Apparently she had taken quite a liking to my display. She didn't really have the words to praise it properly, but her simplistic phrasing—while a little embarrassing—was still nice to hear. Her next words, however, concerned me a little.

"Do you think I could do that?"

I was sure she just admired what she saw and wanted to try it herself. If it was a question of if it was *possible* for her, then of course it was. After all, the Yosogi School was practically built by swordswomen. Even if their gender was a handicap to them, neither Kaeha nor Yuzuriha Yosogi found it insurmountable. I had even taught this style of swordsmanship to a girl named Zelen myself. Saying she couldn't do it would be nothing short of lying.

However...I still hesitated to tell her the truth. Aina was a girl living at an inn. Did she really need a sword in her life? Most likely not. Rather, it was likely that having some small measure of combat ability and self-confidence would only

put her in more danger. For example, if the city were attacked by Zieden, I couldn't rule out the possibility of her fighting back and dying in battle. There was no guarantee that not resisting at all would save her either, but if she wasn't planning on following the path of swordsmanship seriously, then it wasn't something she should touch at all.

That said, I had been drawn to the Yosogi School out of my admiration for Kaeha. I didn't really want to deny Aina's admiration for me out of hand either.

"I don't know. But swinging things around like this can be kind of dangerous, so your mom might get mad."

So I deflected the issue. I didn't have any right to decide how she chose to live her life. If her mother didn't mind, I would have no reservations about teaching her the basics. But even then, I wouldn't be spending that much time in Janpemon, so I couldn't do much more for her than that.

Aina's face fell in disappointment, but at last, she nodded. Patting her on the head, I headed back inside with her.



No matter where you went, no matter what the situation, there were always rules. Obviously you were bound by laws while living somewhere civilized like a city, but even being alone in nature came with its own set of restrictions. For example, if you built a house in a relatively safe part of the woods, you still had to sleep at night and work during the day.

You might say that such a concept was basic enough that it didn't even qualify as a rule, but if you lived in a city, you could easily stay up late into the night drinking or reading books, as long as you didn't mind spending the oil to keep the lights on. In the woods, securing firewood was an issue of life or death. You couldn't afford to waste it on staying up late. On top of that, the trees of the forest would block any moonlight, so with the ground being uneven and unpredictable under your feet, it was dangerous to operate outdoors unless you could see very well in the dark. Basically, due to the circumstances of your lifestyle, your actions were bound by the movement of the sun.

Animals had similar rules. If they caught the scent of another animal, they wouldn't step into its territory unless they had clear intent to fight them for it.

Even if they were able to win that fight, getting injured in the process would make them vulnerable to being hunted in turn. So unless it was absolutely necessary, it was better to avoid those kinds of risks.

Rules had purposes behind them. That was why they existed, and why they were kept. However, it was also true that as long as one could stomach the risk, any rule could be broken. There were plenty of situations where breaking the rules could be more rewarding for someone than following them.

Zieden's invasion of Kirkoim was an example of breaking such a rule, an unspoken agreement between nations. Kirkoim had maintained friendly relations with all of its neighbors, though it never allied itself with any of them. It served as a mediator for disputes between others and helped to maintain international cohesion in the area.

For example, back before the collapse of Paulogia, it had been constantly at war with Vilestorika. But even so, Paulogia and Vilestorika maintained a small amount of trade between each other indirectly, through the intermediary of Kirkoim. That weak relationship led to Vilestorika toppling but not conquering Paulogia, allowing the surviving nobility to build a new nation from the ashes. I had no doubt Kirkoim played a significant role in those discussions too.

However, Kirkoim no longer fulfilled its role as a diplomatic channel for other nations. The sudden invasion from Zieden had taken half of their land, and they had been forced to submit themselves into being a vassal state of Vilestorika to survive. This left the other nations jumping at shadows; their connection to their peers, an influential source of stability for the region, and the rule formed by their unspoken agreement had all gone up in smoke. The church, headquartered in Radlania, was doing everything in its power to ease international tensions, but their efforts had yet to bear fruit.

This situation is probably what led to the current discussion. After four weeks in Janpemon, I had produced a fair number of spears and swords. Through the blacksmithing guild, the duke had started pushing for a review of whether I qualified for an official appointment to the royal court. I had been summoned by the duke to fulfill a specific work request fifty years ago, but this was on an entirely different level.

At any rate, I could more or less guess where this was going to go. Rather than eyeing my skills as a blacksmith, Travoya was more interested in solidifying relations with the elves. The elven caravan made no efforts to spread the news of how much it helped the elves living in the human kingdoms it traveled through, but anyone who paid attention to them would notice it quickly. They must have thought that by having an elf in their employ, they would indirectly draw the aid of elves at large to their kingdom. On top of that, with the official standing of the elven caravan allowing them in places that ordinary merchants could never go, they would know more about the current state of the continent than anyone. Amid the chaos of the current day, it wasn't hard to guess that this information was what Travoya was really after.

Of course, I politely refused. Being requested to use my skill as a blacksmith was one thing, but a life as restricted as one serving in the royal court was as unappealing as you could get, especially if it was only to make use of my connection to the elves. If I had accepted the appointment, I imagined the elves would take to Travoya in a far greater manner than the duke ever expected. I wouldn't be surprised if it even exceeded *my* expectations. It wasn't hard to imagine such a situation to develop to the misfortune of both the elves and the country itself.

I guessed it was about time for me to leave Janpemon. It pained me not to stay long enough to make the example piece or the masterpiece sword for the duke, but staying any longer would sow the seeds of future trouble, and that was something I wanted to avoid. I loved this city, so if I ever wanted to return here, I couldn't afford that risk.

The other problem facing me was with Aina. We had grown quite close lately, but now I was going to have to find a way to tell her of my impending departure. As the daughter of an innkeeper, I felt like she was likely to see me off with no more than a wave and a smile, but at her age, losing a playmate might be difficult for her. Although, if she didn't struggle with my departure at all, I'd probably feel a little sad myself. How much will she have grown the next time we met? The small wooden sword I had carved for her would be far too small for her by then, I imagined.

Looking up at the sky, I watched the wind carry the clouds north. It felt like it

was trying to push me forward. While I was concerned about the actions of Zieden, I wouldn't learn anything new by staying here. So I decided to head north...or more accurately, northeast, toward Odine. The place where I learned magic from Kawshman, where we learned to make magic swords together. Once I finished my stay there, I would head west through Zieden toward Ludoria. I wasn't confident that I could just effortlessly waltz through Zieden at this point, but if I avoided human settlements and stuck to the forests and rivers, I doubted anyone could really stop me.

If I wanted to investigate the goings-on in Zieden, I needed to go there myself. But honestly, I had no idea what I was going to find.



I followed the road north and east.

After saying goodbye to Nonna's inn and to Sheyne and Aina, I began the journey to my next destination. Being innkeepers, they were well accustomed to hellos and goodbyes, so it wasn't such a depressing affair. But hearing the faint traces of childlike loneliness in Aina's voice as she asked me to come visit again was all the motivation I needed to ensure I'd be back someday.

I stuck to the road as much as I could, stepping off only long enough to let the carriages pass me by. Wagons full of grain were heading from Janpemon in the same direction as I was walking, while shipments of fruit from Ardeno came from the opposite direction. By throwing a few copper coins to a passing carriage from Ardeno, the driver happily parted with some of his cargo after counting them up, tossing me a green apple.

One wipe with a cloth and I could fully enjoy the crisp crunch as I walked. I had to say though, it was surprisingly not quite as sweet as I expected. The refreshing flavor made for a good snack on the road. With a big wave, I said goodbye to the carriage.

This time, I was traveling without carriages or boats. I kept a relaxed pace, carried forward by the wind on my back and sleeping in the open country. As I finally made it to Ardeno, the road I walked came to be lined with fruit trees. It was probably around here that I had encountered that greedboar. That brought back plenty of fond memories. I had been invited to the home of the farmers I

had rescued and treated to quite the feast. For the greedboar itself and the farmers it had threatened, that incident had been a stroke of bad luck, but for me it was the exact opposite. Just by hunting a wild animal, I had gotten my hands on some incredibly delicious and elaborate cooking.

This time, I wasn't to encounter any such luck. Instead, as I stepped into the city of Ardeno, I was greeted by a young woman carrying colorful flowers. "Oh, you're an elf, aren't you? People like you are pretty rare around here. We're having a festival today, so please come in and enjoy it!"

With a mischievous smile, she pulled a flower from her basket and stuck it in my hair. Okay, no matter the reason, that was still rather embarrassing. I couldn't just keep the flower in my hair, but I didn't want to insult the girl either, so I stuck it into the mouth of my bag.

It was a cosmos, a pink flower that grew in autumn. Ardeno was apparently holding its harvest festival today. The country produced a wide range of fruit, like oranges and grapes, but apples were their true specialty. The fall, when cosmos flowers bloomed, was the same time of year they would harvest apples. So they decorated the city with these flowers as a sign of thanks for the good harvest received this year and a prayer for another good harvest for the next.

The unexpected, vividly colored display sent a wave of excitement through me. I thought Ardeno might suit me quite well. Just as I had accepted that I wouldn't be struck by great luck outside the city again this time, I had walked right into an event like this. Besides cosmos, bellflowers, saffron, nerine, and zinnia flowers all lined the streets, admired by people wearing bright smiles walking throughout the city.

As expected though, the only ones wearing flowers in their hair were the women. At least, that was the case for as far as I could see. It seemed the girl before had been teasing me after all. I wasn't mad, but it did bother me a little.

Other than that, the festival was extremely fun for me. Walking around the city, I enjoyed chicken skewers and fried apples from the stalls set up by the roadside, despite the small price hike for the event.

Apparently quite a few people were visiting from the surrounding villages. The cheaper inns were all full, so I ended up staying somewhere a little

expensive. It felt like a needless expense, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I had worked so hard to make money exactly so I could spend it on things like this. If I really hated spending money that much, I could live in the forest off of nature's bounty, but I had grown tired of that lifestyle long, long ago. Wasting a little money here and there was all part of the fun.

While sitting down on my bed in the inn, I took a sniff of the cosmos flower I had been gifted.

A festival like this cost the lives of countless flowers, but those lives weren't wasted. After the people enjoyed the decorations, the wilted flowers would be gathered together and either ground up or burned, and their remains eventually returned to the earth to nourish it. Their lives weren't simply consumed; they were to become a foundation for further growth.

After a brief inspection, I figured out that the flowers hadn't been treated with any kind of insecticide, so I popped one into my mouth. The flavor wasn't anything pleasant, but the aroma of the flower was many times stronger when chewed than when simply sniffed.

I was a traveler. I wouldn't be staying in this town long enough for this flower to wilt. So instead of giving it up to the earth, I would enjoy its aroma myself and have it become a part of me.

After enjoying the scent for a time, I finally swallowed. It definitely didn't taste good at all. Even so, it left my heart feeling lighter.



Heading farther north from Ardeno finally brought me to Lake Tsia. The area around the lake was ruled by the Republic of Tsia, a nation whose economy revolved around water freight...and now that I thought about it, it was the place in the Alliance I had visited most. Every time I used a boat to go anywhere in the Alliance, I virtually always ended up passing through.

That said, I only ever visited the place on my way to somewhere else, so I didn't have any strong memories of it. Lake Tsia itself was large and beautiful, but the republic didn't leave such a strong impression. There was one thing I remembered, though: the cities of Folka and Luronte, twins on each side of the

lake, like they were reflections in the water. They were so alike that when passing through the area, if my ship stopped in one of them, it was quite difficult to tell which one I was in.

This time, the unfortunate timing of my overland route took me into the city of Folka just at the beginning of a torrential downpour. The ships plying the waters of the lake and its rivers wouldn't be out for a while. The large increase in the volume of water would make the rivers run faster and so they would become more dangerous, and the monsters living within the water would be more active.

If it were only fish living there, I could happily enjoy the activity, but monsters were an entirely different matter. The ships used here were equipped to deal with attacks from monsters, but there was no point in taking unnecessary risks, especially if the heavy rain was whipping them into a frenzy. Even merchants in their eternal haste were hesitant to feed themselves to the monsters, so while they cursed at the sky, they patiently waited for the waters to calm before returning to their journeys.

As such, the inns and bars of Folka were overflowing. A little bit of rain didn't really bother me, so normally I would have continued on my way, but if the conditions were bad enough that ships weren't crossing the lake, I wasn't interested in trying my luck at it either. I could walk on the surface of the water, but doing so for such long distances was quite tiring. When you added rough conditions from the storm and attacks from monsters, the prospect became even less appealing.

It was possible to divert around the lake, but it was a long route that still ran across numerous rivers. I wasn't in that much of a rush, so even if the rain continued for a few days, and it took another few days for the waters to calm down, that was still only a week to spend in town.

"Sorry, but as you can see, we're full."

I was turned away from yet another bar. Folka had many visitors, and needed to accommodate ships being suddenly trapped in port for extended periods of time, so its inns were well equipped to handle large numbers of people.

However, securing workers to man the restaurants was significantly harder. Now, many merchants and sailors were filling the bars, looking for a place to vent their frustration with the weather. Every place was packed, making it difficult for me to find a place to go myself.

Unfortunately I was staying at an inn that didn't provide meals. Dinner seemed unlikely at this point. Of course, I could handle skipping a few meals if I had to, and one of the mystic peaches in my pack could probably sustain me for a week, but the prospect of missing the chance at a hot meal despite making it into a city was depressing. Besides, I already had a plan for the mystic peaches, so I didn't want to waste them.

Before I was able to leave, though, the owner seemed to have an idea. "Oh, but now that I think about it, we're a bit short on hands at the moment. We could really use someone to help waiting on tables. There's some money and food in it for you if you're interested."

I had to say, I had never been made such an offer before. If I had been asked to cook, naturally I would have refused instantly. While I was capable of the simple cooking needed to live outdoors, I didn't have the confidence to make elaborate meals to be served to others.

But being a waiter? A *waiter*? It sounded a little...interesting.

When thinking of waiters and waitresses, the first person to come to mind was undeniably Caleina, the woman I had met in Vilestorika, though I was sure she had passed away quite some time ago by now. She was quite dexterous and agile, weaving around drunk sailors and fishermen to bring food to the tables. At the same time, she had to dodge around some impolite hands going where they shouldn't. Back then I had found Caleina's skills impressive, but after my training both in the Yosogi School and from the mystics in the East, I was pretty confident in my own agility as well. I had to wonder if I could live up to her example.

That's right, my interest had been piqued.

That said, much of Caleina's skills likely came from her training as a spy, as other waitresses I had met—for example, Suu in White River Province—had been entirely ordinary.

There was no uniform for the waiters here, so after putting on one of the owner's spare aprons, I started carrying plates to and from tables. Understanding what the drunk customers were saying was rather challenging, so the veteran waiters focused on taking orders, as mixing up the food they requested caused more trouble than anything else. As such, I focused on taking food and drinks to the tables. The kind of teamwork required was surprisingly fun.

What's more, the reward I was given after my shift was done was a meal far more extravagant than I could have expected from the owner's offer, leaving me fully satisfied both in taste and volume. As I sat with my belly freshly swollen with good food, I was asked if I could stay on until the ships started moving in about a week, and I was only too happy to accept.

So for the next week, I spent my days in the bar, from morning until night. The owner was quite skilled at making use of people under him, so despite my misgivings it didn't take him long to sweet-talk me into helping prepare the food. That said, I wasn't doing anything as complex as the actual cooking. I was mostly just cutting and preparing ingredients.

To be honest, for all the kitchen knives I'd made, I didn't have much experience using them. I had a much more versatile knife for use in outdoor life, one that was much easier to carry around. I had developed a habit of using that even when I did try my hand at cooking in cities and towns. But while that might have been good enough for myself or my traveling companions, I couldn't use a knife like that while cooking for customers at a restaurant.

With a little bit of instruction from the owner, I was able to cut up potatoes, vegetables, and meats. Of the three, meat turned out to be a surprising challenge. Maybe the knife I usually used was too sharp, as using the kitchen knife was quite a struggle.

My time serving as a waiter went much smoother. I was able to bring food and drink out to the tables smoothly and elegantly, just as I imagined. With permission from the owner, I even got to kick out a number of patrons who drunkenly harassed the other staff. Once the bar closed for the night, I'd then sit and drink with the owner. His name was Radal, and apparently he had been

born in Janpemon. I wondered if we had maybe crossed paths once before.

The week passed in the blink of an eye, and the ships started moving again. Though Radal and the other staff were loath to lose me, I could only burn so much time here. After saying a heartfelt goodbye to each and every one of them, I boarded a ship and left. It would take me to Luronte across the lake, after which the journey to Oline would be rather quick.



Oline's most notable feature, at least visually, was the many spires that filled the city. As a symbol of their authority and rank, the mages which held positions high enough to teach and lead others in the study of magic—known as archmages—lived in these tall, ostentatious structures. As such, the spires became a symbol of power and knowledge, and to a degree pride and arrogance, in Oline.

That aside, I had spent five years living in Oline myself, so I had grown quite used to the architecture here. It even felt a bit nostalgic to see the cityscape again. Following the map in my memories, I walked through the streets of the city of magic, looking for the workshop and forge where I had worked with Kawshman. The cityscape had changed a little in the decades I had been gone, but not enough for me to get lost.

But when I arrived at my destination, Kawshman's workshop was no longer there. For a while, I stood at the spot it should have been, stunned. Of course, I knew full well that Kawshman was long gone, but I had never expected his workshop to disappear along with him. I had assumed one of his students would take up his work and had hoped to speak with them.

As bewildered as I was, I couldn't just stand in the middle of the street and get in everyone's way. With a small word to chastise myself, I set about finding a place to stay.

Ah, okay. I must have instinctively assumed I'd be staying at Kawshman's place, and so hadn't bothered to find an inn before looking for it. I knew that Kawshman was gone, but the foolish notion that I had a place to stay had lingered in the back of my mind.

"Well, that's a problem," I murmured to myself. While Nonna's inn had

certainly undergone a significant change, it was at least in the same place. That had been encouraging to me, but this was a much harder experience.

I had one idea on how I might find Kawshman's legacy. If I went to the city hall, I might be able to find out what had happened to him, and where his students were now. I had once been his student, so I was officially recognized as a mage in Odine.

Kawshman's workshop had been inherited from a dwarf named Rajudor. What would I even say to his students now, who had failed to preserve such an important place? But even so, I wanted to know how far he had managed to go before he died. We had exchanged letters a few times, so I had a rough idea of where he had been headed, but I still didn't know if he had reached his goal.

He was my teacher of magic, my student in blacksmithing, and my rival. I wanted to at least leave a mark of his life in my memories.

I spent the night in Odine and headed to the city hall the next morning. After introducing myself and proving my identity, one of the staff answered my query.

"Information regarding Archmage Kawshman Feedel is confidential, so I cannot answer your request. My apologies, but I will have to ask you to leave immediately."

It appeared at first to be an exceptionally cold response, but that wasn't actually the case. At the same time the staff member delivered that harsh rejection, he quickly scrawled a note on the paper between us where no one else could see.

Ah, so that's what had happened. I now understood why Kawshman's workshop was gone. The clerk's demand I leave immediately held a deeper meaning as well. It wasn't a demand to leave the city hall, it was a warning to get out of Odine as soon as possible.

The military had made Kawshman's research classified. It was only natural that they wouldn't tell anything about that research to a traveler like me, even if I was once Kawshman's student. I doubted the city hall itself knew much of anything about it either.

There were signs of it back then too, but it seemed the military had taken a strong interest in Kawshman's research. Relics were not particularly versatile and could be quite unwieldy, but they made the process of using magic much more stable. On top of that, if you could produce and manipulate mana, you could use them even without the voluminous knowledge required to become a full-fledged mage, making them capable of drastically reducing the barrier of entry for using magic.

Now that I thought about it, maybe that had played a role in how mages had looked down on the use of relics back then, as it devalued their hard work. But a stable source of magic was all too tempting for the military, always in search of more power. Enough so that they hid their existence, monopolized their production, and went through great pains to prevent information about them from leaking out of Odine and the Alliance.

I couldn't just casually waltz in and announce myself as Kawshman's first student. Would they try and take me captive in hopes of furthering their research into the production of relics? Or would they send assassins after me to keep the knowledge I held from leaking out of the city? In either case, the result would be bad for me. This clerk seemed to think so, at the very least, as he had been willing to violate his orders to warn me to escape the city.

If the military found out he had done so, he would inevitably be punished. But he had likely found the prospect of a student being captured or killed for the crime of asking about their old master to be unconscionable. Alternatively, he might have had some obligation to report any students of Kawshman that appeared at city hall asking after him, and felt inclined to shirk that duty.

Thinking back on it now, my last visit to Odine's city hall had brought with it an encounter with a very kind clerk. These two experiences made me quite grateful for the people working there, and apologetic for the danger I might have unintentionally brought on them. Though it wasn't my intention at all, I could understand why the military would respond in that way. In peacetime, it might have been another matter, but the Alliance was currently dealing with the birth of an aggressive new kingdom in Zieden to the west and an invasion from Darottei in the north. It was only natural they would want to monopolize any military advantage they might get their hands on, and be wary of any threat

of that advantage leaking to enemy states.

I supposed I had no choice but to leave Odine. The fact that the military felt the need to conceal his research meant he must have had considerable success in his endeavors. I would have to be satisfied with that discovery for now. If at all possible, I would like to at least retrieve the flaming sword Kawshman had made, but with no clues as to where it was now, it wasn't really feasible. I had been looking forward to seeing how excited Kawshman's students would be when I shared with them knowledge of the expendable relics used in the East, but I had no interest in such an exchange with the military. Rather, I was even willing to become their enemy if I could retrieve that sword.

However, crushing Odine's military would have a profound impact on the Alliance as a whole. It wasn't unreasonable to think doing something like that could lead to the downfall of Janpemon. I couldn't take the easy road here. At least not yet.

I collected my things from the inn and left Odine immediately. Expecting pursuers to follow, I headed west. When leaving Odine, one would normally head south to take a ship from Lake Tsia. Most of the pursuers would no doubt head in that direction, as once I boarded a ship, it would be quite difficult for them to catch me.

However, if they knew I was an elf, they might be able to find me even if I headed west. If they did, I wouldn't hesitate to meet them head-on. Beating up a small force like that would help me vent my frustrations without having a significant impact on the military's overall strength.

It seemed I really had grown quite sentimental.



In order to reach Zieden from Odine, I needed to pass through a number of cities, or rather city-states. The advantage of this route was that the military would be unlikely to guess my path. I had learned in my time working in Folka that the border between the Alliance and Zieden was heavily blockaded. For normal people, it was an impassable obstacle. The merchants had mentioned that heading overland to reach Ludoria had become impossible, forcing them to make a huge diversion south through Vilestorika.

That said, while the border between Zieden and Ludoria was also heavily guarded, it hadn't been entirely locked down. There were probably some rather complicated reasons behind that. For example, while it was true Ludoria would be on guard against Zieden, they would still hesitate to throw their lot in with their old enemy, Vilestorika. On top of that, if the only merchants they accepted were those coming through Vilestorika and its vassal states, it would be like submitting themselves to an economic stranglehold.

So Ludoria hadn't been openly hostile with Zieden, permitting trade to pass through their borders and weighing them against the profits gained from Vilestorika. This was all no more than my conjecture, but it sounded reasonable enough to me.

It wasn't the smartest move, but Ludoria's only other options were to smash through Zieden to reach the Azueda Alliance, or through Vilestorika to reach the sea. Neither of which would be easy, and would effectively come down to luck even if they threw their full weight as a nation into the endeavor. It wouldn't be an easy decision, and it would take time for the nobles and citizenry of the country to come to an agreement.

With Ludoria remaining inactive in the conflict, both Zieden and Vilestorika would have to move cautiously, unsure of where they would throw their weight. However, the uneasy balance that created was far from peace, and would continue to distort the lives and futures of the people in all three kingdoms while it persisted. That distortion would no doubt build to a breaking point...on the other side of which would be a tremendous war.

But leaving that aside for now, what was important was the blockade halting my forward progress. Probably convinced I would head south, any party sent to pursue me would be small, only sent as insurance against a bad guess.

For me, the blockade between countries meant little. I could always slip through the border by passing through the forests that straddled it, something that wouldn't occur to most humans. Ah, and of course if I really tried, I could shake off any human pursuit without much effort.

In short, I was traveling slowly, intentionally stringing my pursuers along. I avoided the forests, maintaining a pace westward that would allow them to

catch up. When I first left Odine, I was hoping to get a chance to beat them up just to release my pent-up feelings, but now that I had had some time to cool off, I was more interested in the pursuers themselves.

Odine's military had no idea that I was a high elf, but they must have known at the very least that I was an elf and a mage. They should have understood that ordinary soldiers would have a difficult time capturing or killing me. Whoever they sent would have to be elites. They would have to either be mages themselves, or specialists trained in the use of relics.

Of course, I was hoping for the latter. How well trained would this special unit be? What kind of relics were they using? If I could witness that, I could see the results of Kawshman's work firsthand. I would be able to accomplish the goals I had set when I visited Odine after all.

During my trip, one night after dinner, I was heading back to my inn. A warning from the wind spirits had me grinning from ear to ear. Naturally, in anticipation of this very moment, I didn't have a drop of alcohol in me.

A moment later, an arrow whizzed through the air. The speed of the shot was incredible.

Even the elite archers of the Great Grasslands couldn't compare to the power of that shot. But no matter how powerful or fast it was, any arrow could be dodged if you knew the timing and trajectory. With the wind spirits to give me that information, no ordinary archer had a chance of hitting me.

As I stepped out of the path of the arrow, I saw it strike a building and shatter.



That's right. The arrow was entirely destroyed, leaving no damage to the wall. It didn't punch into the building, nor did it smash through the stone. It simply broke apart. Aside from the incredible power behind the shot, it was clear the arrow was perfectly ordinary.

Oh, this was really interesting. Turning to see my attacker, I saw a man in a heavy cloak vanish into the darkness. I imagined that cloak was a relic as well.

A single glance was enough for me to get a grasp on his abilities, though.

The fact he only hid himself after firing the shot meant that this particular individual could only use one relic at a time. His method of attack was a relic bow. He likely fed mana into the bow itself, hardening it at the moment of the shot. That would increase the power of the shot significantly, far more than one could expect from a shot fired by a human being.

The cloak likely had some ritual in it to hide the wearer. Something like embroidery would cease to function if it bent and twisted with the wind, so it wouldn't be reliable. There must have been some kind of metal plate inside it where the ritual was engraved. Though actually, the cloud of darkness that concealed him had come from the entire cloak at once, so there must have been more than one plate. The plates would then have to be connected by Fairy's Silver or some other material like monster bones, allowing mana to flow between them so they could function as a single relic.

That's really impressive. Way to go, Kawshman!

While I dodged the blade of another attacker who had suddenly appeared beside me, I was celebrating inside. There were four men pursuing me in total, each and every one of their relics far better than I had anticipated. I doubted every single one of them had been made by Kawshman himself, but there was no doubt that the foundation he laid had been instrumental in their development. After all, the ritual used on the first attacker's bow was one that he had thought up while I was still in Odine.

"You use a bow, right Acer? Wouldn't a magic bow be interesting? You could make it so that drawing back the bow to a certain point completed the form of the ritual, activating the spell at the perfect moment."

He had seemed so proud of the idea. At the time, though, I had told him it would be too dangerous, as strengthening the stopping power of a bow like that would make it difficult to tell where the arrow was going to end up. It seemed he had remembered my criticism and worked a way around it. Though it wasn't perfect, he had made it in a way that fired the arrow straight forward.

As my teacher, my student, and my rival, Kawshman was truly incredible. Even while I was under attack, I couldn't stop grinning. A bow like that would inevitably be quite difficult to use, but the attacker's first arrow had been on the right course to hit me.

The second attacker's sword was wreathed in lightning, meaning if it struck someone wearing metal armor, it would still deal significant, possibly even fatal, damage.

Excellent relics, wielded by elite warriors. I could understand completely how the military in Odine would be afraid of this information leaking out to other countries. That said, not just anyone could make use of relics, and it didn't seem like the impact those few people had would be enough to change wartime tactics on a grander scale yet.

And if it mattered, the skill and power of those pursuing me were still a far cry from being able to capture or kill me. To the point that even without the aid of the spirits, I was confident they wouldn't be able to beat me. Though the possibilities these relics created were quite interesting, just like seven-star adventurers, they still weren't quite at the level needed to take me on. If the production of relics and skills of their wielders continued to develop at this pace, they might manage it someday, but I didn't know if Odine would be capable of such advancement now that Kawshman was gone.

At any rate, it was about time I put a stop to the attack. If I used my sword to cut them down, I'd damage the cloaks beyond usefulness. On top of that, once I defeated one or two of them, there was a possibility the others would run. Taking them all down at once with the help of the spirits felt like the best option. I had a deep interest in all of the relics they were using, so if at all possible, I intended to take every single one of them for myself. They would have to serve as my personal souvenirs from the Alliance.

The military would no doubt be angry at their loss, but they could always make more. Skilled wielders for their relics would be much harder to come by, though, so I would leave them alive to return home. It was perhaps a softer hand than was necessary for dealing with people who had come to take my life, but considering how little danger I was in and how little effort it would take to fight back, it seemed appropriate.

In other words, the four men were still far too weak to qualify as real enemies.

“Spirits of the wind.”

I called upon the spirits lingering in the cold night breeze.

Chapter 4 — Changing and Unchanging, Part Two

After passing through the forests of the Alliance, I made it into Zieden...and well, since I had crossed what was supposed to be a closed border, going into any towns I came across was rather risky. I didn't have good information about how Zieden took to travelers, or even how they felt about elves at this point. I had heard some rumors here and there, but they all came from the Alliance, so none of them were in Zieden's favor.

To the people of the Alliance, Zieden was the culprit responsible for throwing the whole center of the continent into chaos. There was no telling when they might attack, so it went without saying they were treated with hostility. But negative rumors mixed with fearful and uneasy conjecture wasn't exactly reliable information. Whether I was going to intervene or let things develop on their own, I would need to look at things from a few more angles.

Zieden very well might have had compelling reasons or circumstances behind their behavior, though I couldn't imagine what they might be. Of course, from the perspective of those being invaded and hurt in the process, nothing could justify their actions.

The destruction and danger they had brought to the people's daily lives were causing resentment to spread among their neighbors, but I had no reason to let that dictate my actions. If I was going to act, it needed to be because of my own feelings or principles, for example, to protect the people who were close to me.

That being said, I did want to alleviate the threat to Ludoria and Janpemon. I obviously wasn't thinking of anything as extreme as wiping out Zieden...at least not yet. I really wanted to do *something*, but I had no idea what that should be. In the past, I'd felt I was much quicker to use force to resolve the problems in front of me. It seemed I had changed a bit after my journey to the East.

As I pondered these things, I continued to the elven settlement within the forest. Judging by the forest's size, it was probably a small village with no Spirit Tree to protect it. Elves typically had little interest in what went on outside their

own forest, but the degree to which they were able to maintain that isolation varied based on the scope of the forest they lived in. For larger forests, it wasn't even really possible for humans to wander in by accident, and those who came looking for the elves would be turned aside by the Spirit Tree's barrier.

However, for smaller forests that couldn't support a Spirit Tree, it was much more plausible for human hunters to accidentally stumble into the heart of the forest, or for human armies to challenge the elven village just as those nobles from Ludoria had attacked an elven settlement decades ago. So even if they didn't actively interact with the world outside their forest, the elves living in a forest of this size would still need to be on guard. For example, they would have to turn hunters away from the heart of the forest before they discovered where the elves lived.

As such, it was possible the elves living here had some idea of what had happened here in Zieden. I kept my expectations low, but it seemed likely I'd at least be able to figure out how recently the elven caravan had visited, either from this forest or others in the area. The caravan was in the business of buying fruit from the different elven forests, so if they had come to Zieden at all, they should have visited a number of elven settlements here.

If those visits had been at all recent, it would be proof that the country's attitude toward elves hadn't changed much, meaning I would be relatively safe to visit towns across the kingdom. But if they hadn't been here recently, I would need to avoid any human settlements. If I was truly desperate, I could sneak in at night to accomplish what I needed to, but that was really just a last resort.

As I approached the heart of the forest, I asked the wind spirits to carry a message forward for me. Getting any closer without warning would be too much of a shock for them. In human terms, it would be about as rude as entering someone's home without even knocking on the door.

The wind blew through the forest, rustling the leaves around me.

The elves here would probably...no, they would almost certainly treat me as a guest of honor. The more I'd insist that they treat me normally, the more intense their hospitality would become. That was why I felt the need to warn

them of my arrival in advance.

Yes, the forest here wasn't that large, but that was only from elven standards, as far as what kind of forest could support a Spirit Tree. In human terms, it was plenty large. The scent of plant life hung heavy in the air, and it was teeming with wild animals.

It was a peaceful, prospering forest. Any forest that flourished to this degree would obviously have its fair share of monsters, but there weren't any nearby for the time being.

In no time at all, the wind spirits returned with a word of welcome from the village. With a nod, I started walking again. I figured the mystic peaches I carried would be a sufficient gift. It was the fruit of a spirit tree, one that could only be found in the Ancient Gold Empire. As long as they were elves, there was no way they wouldn't be thrilled to see them.



When I arrived at the settlement, the elves had all lined up outside to greet me. They weren't kidding when they said they were ready to welcome me.

A single elf emerged from the lineup. Judging by his demeanor, he seemed to be the elder of this village. Of course, being an elf, he still looked like a young man.

"The announcement of your coming was a wonderful use of the wind. I would have expected nothing less from a high elf. The elves of the Ha Forest are truly honored by your visit." Stepping in front of me, the elder prepared to drop to his knees, but I gestured for him to stop. If he knelt in front of me, others would no doubt do likewise. While I was happy for the warm welcome, I really didn't need them bowing to me like this.

"Receiving such a warm welcome despite giving you so little warning is more than I could ask for. I'm not a big fan of all the stiff ceremonial stuff, but I appreciate you going to all this trouble."

Though the elder seemed a bit perplexed at the way I desperately waved off his formal greeting, he nevertheless returned to his feet. And though he hesitated, when I offered a handshake, he did eventually reciprocate. He really

didn't need to be so timid. I wasn't going to bite him or anything.

As I looked around at the elves gathered together and the village behind them, I realized it was quite a bit bigger than I had anticipated. I couldn't imagine these were all the elves who lived here, so the population of the entire village was likely two hundred or more.

It was then that I remembered how many elves had moved here from Ludoria back during that incident. Those who had chosen to remain here afterward led to the settlements greatly increasing their number. Zieden had still been Zaints and Jidael at that time, so many elves had chosen to move there.

Looking back to the crowd of elves again, I did have faint memories of some of these faces. Back then, they had all left Ludoria at my request. I imagined they hadn't been especially happy to be forced to move to unknown lands. But now, I saw nothing but welcoming smiles on them, with no hint of any resentment.

"Lord Acer!" As I was led into the village, a child ran up to me. In human terms, he looked about ten years old. Of course, I had no memory of him. "Um, they told me a long time ago, you held me once. D-Do you remember me?"

And yet, that was the question that came. Actually, now that he mentioned it...

If he looked ten in human terms, that meant he was probably sixty or seventy years old. Back during the incident in Ludoria, while I was visiting each of the villages to ask them to leave the kingdom, I certainly remembered holding a child who hadn't yet been a year old. I had asked the spirits to bless the baby, since traveling with one so young to foreign lands was sure to be a trial. I definitely remembered that.

I see. He was an elf, so that's how much he would have aged in all this time. Win had been born after him and yet had already grown into an adult. It really made the difference in life spans between their races apparent.

"Ah, yes, I remember. Your name was...hmm, was it Shiez?"

Elves and high elves weren't particularly attached to names. Not having a name was a bit too inconvenient though, so at least until they reached a certain

age, the village picked a name to use for them. If they chose to leave the forest, they would either keep that name or pick an entirely new one. Back then, since he had only been a year old, he hadn't been given a name yet. I had just happened to be around, so they'd asked me to give him one.

As I dragged that name out of the far corners of my memory, the boy's face lit up with pride and joy. At the same time, the nostalgic memory brought a smile to my face. I never expected to feel time's passage like this here.

"If you need anything while you're here, just ask me!" the boy, Shiez said emphatically, to which I nodded.

Actually, I was quite grateful for the offer. I had a lot of questions about this village, but most of the elves here would probably be rather nervous when talking to me. Having a child of the village around would serve to lighten the atmosphere quite a bit.

Elven children were raised by the community as a whole. It wasn't that parents, or especially mothers, had no affection for their children at all. Rather, everyone in the community treated each child as their own. Maybe including "everyone" in that statement was a stretch, but it meant that the vast majority of elves here would be very fond of him.

"Thanks. Having someone like you who knows a lot about the village will really help me," I replied honestly. Besides, I already liked children. Having someone Shiez's age want to help me so earnestly made me quite happy.



"Ugh..."

With a bit of a groan, I dropped my belongings in a room made from leaves and ivy that had been prepared for me. My pack had grown quite heavy. The relics I had taken from the group of four that had attacked me on my way out of the alliance were rather bulky.

Now that I had a chance to relax, I could take some time to look over those relics a bit. Really, I should have been spending my time going over what I had learned from the elves here, but I hadn't quite digested the information yet. It was like when I got stuck in blacksmithing, I'd feel the sudden need to start

cleaning the forge for no reason. I figured this was the same in principle.

Anyway, the group of four men that attacked me had graciously surrendered four cloaks, one bow, three short swords, and two small shields. Aside from the bow, I decided to dismantle the rest of the relics piece by piece to find the rituals engraved where they would otherwise be invisible. I learned that my conjecture during that fight had been more or less correct when it came to the cloaks, bow, and swords.

The cloak improved one's stealth, allowing them to operate covertly at night. The bow had a strength and elasticity that made it fire arrows with unbelievable power. The swords crackling with lightning would inflict damage and possibly stun opponents even if they blocked the blade with armor or a weapon of their own. The swords also had rituals engraved to preserve and repair the weapon, as well as protections to prevent the lightning from harming the user.

The shields, on the other hand, thoroughly betrayed my expectations. As much as they were shaped like shields, their function was entirely unrelated. As I've said many times before, any damage or distortion to the ritual engraved on a relic would render it entirely powerless. That meant they were ill-suited for use as a tool to block attacks and absorb impacts. As such, I had been quite excited to find out how exactly they had made these little shields work...but they weren't designed to deflect attacks at all. The rituals engraved on them did nothing more than shine brightly.

They had been designed so the face of the shield would shine a blinding light, so while the user pretended they would use the shield to block incoming attacks, they would then pass magic through it to blind their attacker. Rather than for use on a crowded battlefield, it had been designed for covert operations like our scuffle a few nights back. It definitely gave me the impression of an assassin's tool.

It seemed that at present, Odine's military didn't have the relics or personnel to have a large impact on the battlefield. The impression these tools gave were that they were focusing their efforts on covert operations and assassinations instead. Kawshman had always wanted his relics to be useful for adventurers...but I suppose anything suited for them would also benefit an assassin too. I had no strong opinion myself on how the relics were used. I was

only interested in how the tools and rituals on them had been developed.

Considering the relics I had here, the research Kawshman had begun had come a long way. That being said, I couldn't help but feel like the actual construction of these relics was...somewhat lacking.

They weren't especially horrible or anything, but they clearly only made the grade for a mass-produced model. Yes, as a mass-produced item, I would give it a pass.

Back then, Kawshman and I had used every ounce of skill the two of us possessed to create his flaming sword and the sword at my hip now. Kawshman's knowledge of rituals and magic were clearly first class, and I could brag that the swords I had made, which such rituals were engraved on, were masterworks in their own right. To see the relics descended from that research only amount to "just good enough" left me feeling despondent.

The development and application of rituals had clearly advanced considerably since our time, but it seemed the craftsmanship had been neglected, producing an end result far different from what we'd aimed for. That was my evaluation of the craftsmanship of the tools themselves, but also of the quality of the inscription work on them. Being only barely a pass, even the tiniest bit of damage to the ritual would render it useless. Even the rituals meant to preserve and repair the weapon could easily be damaged and lose their function.

So while these weren't exactly single-use relics, they were clearly expendable to some extent. All weapons and armor could be classified in a similar way, as anything used in combat would break down after enough use, but this was far from the ideal Kawshman and I had been pursuing.

Kawshman had been saddled with a very limited life span, so compromise was an unfortunate necessity for him. Humans couldn't chase romantic ideals forever. That said, as the student of a dwarf, he should have had an unerring respect for the art of craftsmanship. And yet, from these relics in front of me, there was no sign of that respect at all.

Once again, I was struck by this sentimental feeling. Someday, I needed to take back that flaming sword from Odine's military. And, after recording the rituals used on these relics, I would find a forge where I could destroy them.

Taking back the sword would have to wait until the situation calmed down first, though. I probably wouldn't be able to work on it for a few decades. Now, as for the main matter at hand, I had learned three interesting facts from the elves here.

The first was that a forest south of here, in what was once the Duchy of Kirkoim, had been attacked by revenants.

Revenants were monsters born from the corpses of people. You could think of them as particularly fresh zombies. They were a particularly rare breed of monster, though, as the conditions needed to produce them were rather strict. For example, if the corpse had been significantly damaged, the mana gathering in it would leak out. In particular, if the stomach was ruptured, it was virtually impossible for a revenant to be created from it. For that reason, many cultures included the cutting open of the stomach and removal of the internal organs as part of their burial rites.

Even if someone were to die out in the wild, their body would likely be eaten by wild animals, making it impossible for them to turn into a revenant. On top of that, depending on the time of year, bodies could decay very quickly, making it more likely for them to rot away before enough mana could gather within them to create a monster.

These factors together made revenants rather rare as far as monsters went. The exceptions would be entire villages wiped out by sickness, where there was no one left to bury the bodies, or wartime when there were too many dead for burials to happen in time. In situations like those, where large numbers of bodies were left unattended, it was possible for revenants to appear.

It seemed like the revenants who had attacked the forest in Kirkoim had been born from the large number of victims in Zieden's attack. I supposed it was understandable enough after a war of that scale, but that didn't make it any more pleasant.

The second piece of information was that Airena and the elven caravan hadn't visited the area in a number of years.

That was about as much as I had expected. Either Airena was wary of entering

Zieden herself, or the country had forbidden them entry, but I couldn't say which was the case. Either way, it seemed the smarter choice was for me to avoid visiting any human settlements while I was here.

The last thing I learned was that Zieden was making calls for the elves, as residents of their kingdom, to supply troops for the war effort. The soldiers that had delivered the letter had been ordered to search the forest where the elves lived themselves. As the request had come directly to them, and not through the proper political channel of the elven caravan, the elves had given no response. However, some of the elves worried that continuing to ignore Zieden's demands would eventually lead to war between them and the human kingdom.

After what had happened in Ludoria, the elves had started to focus on developing ways to defend themselves, but they were still hopelessly outnumbered. If Zieden's military put real effort into it, the forest and their village within it would be reduced to ash.

It was still unclear why Zieden wanted to draw the elves into their war. It was starting to sound more and more likely that Zieden had forbidden the elven caravan's entry into the country. They were likely trying to cut the isolated, solitary elves off from those who were more familiar with the workings of the human world. It all felt too wrong.

If Zieden was planning on moving against the elves living here, I would have to make a move myself. A war breaking out between the humans and the elves with significant losses on both sides could create a gulf between them that would persist for centuries, if not longer. Using my powers as a high elf to threaten Zieden into submission or move the other nations to action would resolve the situation with far less damage. That said, even that would still result in casualties.

With a heavy sigh, I flopped onto the floor. This was too big of a problem for me to come to an easy conclusion. However, wasting time in indecision threatened leaving things until it was too late for me to do anything. As much as it troubled me, failing to act would result in losing something important.

I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. Drawing back on my high-

strung emotions, I beckoned sleep to come and relax me so that once I had rested, gathered my strength, and awoke in the morning, I would be ready to act.



Leaving the elven village behind, I left the forest and headed west toward Ludoria...or so I would have liked. Instead, my plans had changed, taking me toward the capital of Zieden. It seemed I had much less time to act than I had first hoped.

It was clear that if Zieden was demanding that the elves provide soldiers for the army, they were looking to expand their military might. If they were so determined to bolster their military, they must have been intending to use it soon. That meant I could easily predict their next move. Whether it was to escalate their war with Vilestorika, invade the Alliance, or turn their sights on Ludoria, I couldn't yet tell. But it was clear they were planning some large-scale movement. If they had difficulty enlisting the elves, they might burn one or two forests down to make a show of them first...but either way, I wasn't happy with how things were turning out.

My journey to the East had taught me that when I wanted to do something, there was a difference between what I felt I should do, and what I actually had to do. If it was something I really wanted to do, I should do it. That was simply responding to my natural desires as a living being. Those were the kinds of things I could be selfish about.

However, if it was something I didn't really want to do but did just because I thought I should, I would inevitably end up making a mistake somewhere. I would turn into a walking disaster. As a high elf, I had too much power at my disposal, and was capable of too many things, so I couldn't allow myself to fall into that trap.

Now that I thought about it, the rest of my people deciding to seclude themselves in the Forest Depths had been right to do so. There was virtually nothing that could happen in this world that would require the high elves to step up and lead.

However, I knew I couldn't live like that, and that still wasn't an option for me

now. In the same way, I couldn't stand idle while tragedy threatened the people and places that I loved.

Ignoring the roads, I walked through the fields. Ignoring the bridges, I crossed over the surface of the rivers, heading in a straight line for the capital of Zieden. Humans were the most prosperous race in this world at the moment, but they still existed in a limited domain. The unreliability of torches, candles, and burning oil had left night an untamed frontier. Though they might proudly claim a territory as theirs, they saw next to nothing off the main roads, and couldn't stop those roads from being attacked by herds of wild animals. A high elf like myself could easily pass below the notice of any human eye, even as I approached the largest city in the kingdom.

After a few weeks of walking and then waiting for nightfall, I approached the city of Jingar, Zieden's capital. It was an enormous city built on an open plain, positioned well to connect to the various roads running through the kingdom, built with an emphasis on its economic and political purposes. The walls surrounding the city looked fairly new in the moonlight.

Before their merger, Zaints and Jidael of course had their own capital cities. I had even visited the old capital of Zaints, a city named Sviej. After the merger though, those old capitals were lower in status compared to the new one they had built. Jingar, the city before my eyes, was that new capital. In truth, if I wanted to do something politically about Zieden, I would need to deal with those two old capitals as well, but that was beyond the scope of my plans at the moment.

However, as convenient as a city built on the plains was for other reasons, that also left it vulnerable to attack. Zieden's capital was no exception. As much as it was protected by high walls, it looked far easier to breach than a mountain stronghold.

That wasn't good. For normal countries it was one thing, but it seemed especially careless for a kingdom like Zieden that was in constant conflict with its neighbors. It would put unnecessary stress on the people living there. So, I figured I'd give them a hand and bolster the defenses of the city a bit.

The city gate was already closed, and I could see the light from the torches of soldiers patrolling the walls. Getting as close as I could without being spotted, I took a deep breath to calm myself and put my hand to the ground. What I was about to ask the spirits was huge in scale, but still a surprisingly delicate operation despite its simplicity. However, ever since my time spent with the golden dragon in the Ancient Gold Empire, I felt my connection with the spirits was stronger than ever. I was pretty confident I could do this without a problem.

"Spirits of the earth," I intoned, picturing what I desired in my mind. A mountain born from the earth. Not an entire mountain range, but just a single, solid, stone mountain, maybe one or two hundred meters tall, so that it would be difficult but crossable by humans.

It would emerge just barely outside the city gate. Naturally, such a large mountain emerging would create a lot of noise and shaking. But with some effort on the part of the spirits, that noise and shaking could be reduced enough to make them effectively unnoticeable. Doing something like that would have been quite difficult for me in the past, but right now, things were going well.

Of course, no matter how quiet and gentle the birth of the mountain was, creating something that large wouldn't go unnoticed by the guards on watch. It would certainly cause a huge uproar and gather an immense crowd in no time. That would still buy me a bit more time than I would have had with the noise though.

And this wasn't the end either. Sliding down the newly born mountain, I quickly ran over to the next gate. Jingar had been built as a square, so it had one gate facing each of the cardinal directions. I had just sealed the eastern gate, with my next target being the southern one.

No doubt once the southern gate was closed, they would realize what my goal here was. No matter how quickly I worked, or how stealthily I moved, I figured the best I could manage was to seal off three of them.

But that would be enough. I never intended to entirely block off the city in the first place. With three of the gates sealed, the residents would realize that they

could be very easily trapped within by a siege at any time. It seemed quite suitable as a threat.

But as they say, “the last drop makes the cup run over.” If I sealed off the city entirely, it might drive Zieden into a panic, spurring them onto further, more drastic action. That was the opposite of what I wanted. Cutting off all hope of escape had a tendency to provoke someone to desperate action. Leaving a route of escape for your opponent to sap their resolve to fight was essential, or so it was written in a certain book of wartime tactics. I couldn’t remember if that book had been one I read in my past life or in this one, but either way I was putting its teachings to use.

After closing three of Jingar’s gates, I left the city behind, returning on the path I had come back to the elven village. I felt like Zieden’s efforts would be focused internally for the next little while.



“Lord Acer, did you know? If you break open their shell, you can eat the insides!”

I nodded at the energetic explanation Shiez was giving me. Of course I knew. Even if I hadn’t, the trees would have told me, so I hardly needed a guide to teach me about the forest. But I wasn’t about to turn down his offer to guide me.

He seemed to have decided it was his responsibility to take care of me while I stayed in the village, and the other elves seemed content to let me play with him. In truth, I had been given plenty of opportunities to play with the other children in the village as well.

Almost a year had passed since I had sealed three of Jingar’s gates, a full rotation of seasons having come and gone. Shortly after, Zieden had sent messengers to the elven forests to discuss things with them. Apparently the sudden appearance of three mountains outside their city had reminded them of the great earthquake and sudden closing of a mountain pass in Ludoria. Rumors that the elves had been responsible for both events persisted to this day. The fact I had hidden myself and my involvement in all three events seemed to be working out well.

Zieden seemed to have, quite correctly, taken my threat to mean their royal palace could be similarly crushed by a mountain at any moment. However, the elves all came back with the same answer: if you want to discuss things with us, do it with the caravan. With no way to sort things out with the elves living in their borders, they had no choice but to invite the elven caravan back into their kingdom.

It was the first sign of weakness Zieden had ever shown on the international stage. Besides inviting the caravan in, they also had to agree to make a number of concessions to them. After all, considering how long the members of the caravan lived, they had a much longer connection to Zieden's society than any human might.

Anyway, I doubted this would be enough to put an end to the wars, but it had at least slowed Zieden down.

I had to admit, there had been a bit of risk involved in this plan. There had always been the possibility that Zieden would see the threat from the elves and respond with panicked violence. Of course, if that had happened, I would have been on the front lines trying to keep the number of casualties to a minimum, but thankfully I hadn't needed to do any such thing.

Seeing Shiez struggling a bit to get the walnut open, I took it from him and picked up another. For an elf, using your fingers alone to crack open a walnut was actually quite a challenge. He had likely seen the adult elves do something similar and decided he could do the same, but it actually took a bit of know-how.

If you inspected a walnut thoroughly, you could see it had softer and harder parts to it. If you held these two parts together and squeezed tight with both hands, the harder part would break open the softer part for you. It was like using a second walnut as a tool to open the first one.

As a blacksmith and a swordsman, I was more than capable of breaking a walnut open with my bare hands, but I was more interested in teaching the trick to Shiez than showing off my own grip strength.

Of course, the best option was to just use a tool. A short time ago, some tools

made by the dwarves from monster teeth and claws had started making their way into elven communities. For example, a dwarven knife would easily split a walnut in two.

Passing the freshly cracked walnut back to Shiez, he took it with a mixed expression. While impressed, he also seemed somewhat unhappy. Ah, maybe he had been intending to break it open so he could give it to me, not so that he could eat it himself? It was rather cute. I was pretty sure a big reason he had grown so attached to me was because I was a high elf, but there was no point in worrying about that now.

I wouldn't be spending much longer here in the forest. Once the elven caravan arrived in Zieden, I would be leaving to join up with them. That would mean saying goodbye to Shiez and this forest. Elves lived for a long time, so it wasn't like we were saying goodbye forever, but I had no idea when we might meet again.

Once I met up with the caravan and learned what I could from Airena, I intended to head for Ludoria. It was about time I visited Kaeha's grave. After that, what would I do? Depending on any letters Airena might have for me from Win, I supposed I might end up heading west...but if not, perhaps I would pay a visit to my old home in the Forest Depths in Pulha.

If my conjecture was correct, the way to reach the world of the giants above the clouds would be through the phoenixes that I guessed slept in Pulha. I wasn't looking forward to the scolding I would be getting from the high elf elders, but if I wanted to make Airena's dream of finding the White Lake come true, I would need to return there eventually.

In exchange for being allowed to meet the phoenixes, I had brought mystic peaches. While it likely wouldn't work just anywhere, planting the seeds of mystic peaches in the Forest Depths had a good chance of seeing them grow into new Spirit Trees. Bringing a new species of Spirit Tree back to them would give me a good chance of getting a favor out of them.

The whole idea still had an unpleasant feeling to me, though it was one I was ready to face. After going to so many places, seeing so many things, and meeting so many people, I had learned that the elders' words had been more or

less correct. The lifestyle they cultivated in the Forest Depths was for the sake of avoiding bringing chaos into the world. Because I violated those rules, showing up and asking for a favor from them felt somehow wrong.

But even knowing that, even if I had no intentions of bringing back the mystic peaches or trying to meet the phoenixes, I still needed to go back home.

Seeing Shiez's face go beet red as he put two walnuts together and squeezed with all his might, I couldn't help but smile. For a child his size, even if you knew the trick, it wasn't an easy task.

Anyway, I could worry about the future later. The chaos here in the middle of the continent had yet to settle. I would watch over things here for a while.

There might still be a need for me to get involved.



A breeze announcing the new arrival blew through the elven village.

The wind always felt a little different based on whichever elf or Spirit Caller sent the message. Though it wasn't particular enough to be called a characteristic, there were some tiny quirks you could notice if you were really familiar with the Spirit Caller. And this time, the softness of the wind and the scent it carried were very familiar to me.

This was, without a doubt, the elven caravan. Airena must have sent the wind this time. Though it hadn't even been twenty years since we parted ways as I left for the East, a nostalgic feeling brought a smile to my face.

The message sent by elves to announce themselves also served as a display of their relative power, so a poor announcement could lead to the visitor being looked down on by their hosts. To that point, Airena's declaration was first class, prompting the elves of the village to immediately prepare for the caravan's arrival.

One of the main reasons the elven caravan had been accepted as a representative for all elves outside the forests was because of Airena herself. She was famed as a seven-star adventurer, had the experience and nerve to negotiate with entire kingdoms, and was talented enough in the Spirit Arts to earn the recognition of elves everywhere. All of these together made her

perfect for the role.

However, as much as she was an elf, she couldn't hold the position forever. When she finally decided to step down, would someone else appear to take her place? Or perhaps, it fell to me to teach the Spirit Arts to the caravan so that a suitable successor would emerge from among them, as thanks for all Airena had done for me. At the risk of sounding a bit stuck up, I thought I was pretty good at teaching them to people.

Anyway, that could all wait until the current situation had been resolved. Depending on how everything played out, my plans for the future might very well change, so there was no use in thinking too hard on it now.

I gathered my belongings in preparation for my departure and waited for the caravan to arrive.

"I feel I have said this many times before, Lord Acer, but it has been a long time. And welcome home. I cannot express how happy I am to see you back safely." Perhaps for the sake of the other elves around us, Airena's greeting was rather formal, but her voice and expression couldn't hide her genuine joy in seeing me again.

How many times had we split up and then reunited now? It was kind of funny when you thought of it like that. Many things had changed, but there was always someone here who barely changed at all, who I kept meeting again and again.

"Long time no see. And thanks, I'm glad to be back. It was a great journey. I saw all sorts of interesting things and even got a hint at what we were looking for."

Airena smiled and nodded at my reply. Did she realize what I meant by "what we were looking for"? Did she realize I was referring to the giants, and the white lake she wanted to find? No, no matter how good she was at guessing, she would never imagine I would already have such great results. I couldn't wait to see the look she'd give me when I told her about it. I would tell her after she gave me the letters from Win that I suspected she had for me.

But there was something else we needed to discuss first. "That can wait. I

think we need to talk about what we're going to do from here."

First, we needed to discuss what stance the elves would take with Zieden. The elves were currently putting up a strong resistance to them, demanding that the caravan be accepted into their borders and that they not interfere with the elven forests, among a variety of other conditions.

But of course, this wasn't a conversation to be had by Airena and myself. The elders of this village and the other forests would also need to be included. Before all of that though, I wanted to express my intentions to Airena. I had no doubt she would do everything she could to accommodate my wishes.

In the end, the elves in the forests wouldn't care much what happened in the outside world. As long as they could continue living their lives in peace, they would remain distant from any matters outside their territory. They would likely do whatever I asked as well, but that wouldn't necessarily be what they *wanted* to do.

"Airena, I find myself lamenting the current state of the center of the continent. I don't like this sense of unease that hangs over the world, as the children and grandchildren of the people I knew, and the places I love, are constantly in fear of being trampled underfoot."

But Airena would want to accommodate my desires of her own free will. Even if we hadn't met in over a decade, I still trusted her.

Airena nodded. "Understood. I feel very much the same way. You have already done an excellent job of creating an opportunity for us to enact change. Let us make the most of it that we can." Her response was every bit as reliable as I had hoped it would be.

Of course, I had no intention of leaving everything on her shoulders. Uniting the elves under a single purpose would be much quicker if I tagged along. On top of that, if the power of a high elf became necessary, I'd be there to supply it. But Airena herself would know best how and where to apply it.

Ever since returning to the center of the continent, anxiety and tension had been eating at the edges of my heart. But now, I could finally feel those negative feelings starting to clear up.



“You guys have gotten quite a bit bigger since I left,” I said after meeting up with the elven caravan.

Of course, I didn’t mean that any of the elves had grown up or anything like that. Everyone who joined the caravan had been recognized as an adult before being allowed to do so, and even if they had been children, they wouldn’t grow all that much after only a decade or two.

“Seeing your surprise is all the reward I need for our hard work!” the elven minstrel Huratio beamed with pride. Of course, he was the same as when I last saw him as well.

“Come on Hue, you know you didn’t do...okay, not *that* much. Lord Acer, this was all a result of Airena’s hard work!” Naturally, the painter Rebees was quick to put Huratio in his place.



Seeing their usual exchange brought a smile to my face. When I'd said they were bigger than before, I was talking about the size of the caravan itself. When I had last parted ways with them, there had only been eight members. Now, they easily exceeded twenty.

There were more wagons than before, and even more elves than those could carry, meaning some had to ride horses alongside them. That was perfect for me. I still hadn't conquered my motion sickness, so I'd happily borrow one of the horses. Unlike before, I was now perfectly capable of riding a horse on my own.

The growth of the caravan had likely come about due to all sorts of reasons, both good and bad. One positive reason would no doubt be the work of the caravan piquing the interest of elves in forests they visited, drawing them to the outside world. Well, many elves might consider that a negative, but it was a change for the better from my perspective. Instead of those curious elves having to throw themselves out to the human world alone, they could live alongside the caravan. In a way, you could call the caravan something like a traveling elven forest.

A negative cause would definitely be the decline in the world's political climate. As things were now, it was too dangerous to travel around the world without a fairly large party. That hadn't affected me much, but I was an exception. Most elves weren't all that used to fighting. By gathering in a larger group like this, they could avoid a lot of the danger the world might throw at them. On top of that, Airena and the other adventurers could teach the elves how to protect themselves.

To me, it looked like the caravan's growth had been driven by necessity. I had no doubt that with it came no small measure of hardship. That went without saying for Airena, but even Huratio and Rebees must have had their hands quite full. That was why Rebees couldn't entirely deny the hard work Huratio had put in.

"Yeah, I'm quite surprised. You two are amazing. Oh, it's nice to see you again too, Julcha and Piune. You guys must have been working hard."

One by one, I greeted those I remembered from the old caravan by name. It

seemed Piune had decided to stay with the caravan after all. I wondered if she'd also taken up dancing like I suggested?

"I'm so glad to see you back safely, Lord Acer!" Piune greeted me back with a bright voice, but I couldn't tell for sure what she was doing with the caravan for now. But with the way Julcha winked at me from where she couldn't see, maybe she had made it as a dancer after all. I had to admit I was a little...okay, extremely excited to see her perform.

The caravan was now traveling around Zieden, holding discussions with the elders of each of the elven settlements. The topic of conversation was to ask for their help in a way that wouldn't put too much of a burden on them or their communities.

The elves living in the forests wanted nothing but stability for themselves. The caravan and I, however, were asking for a little more. We wanted to bring stability to the entirety of the center of the continent. If we didn't bridge the gulf between us as soon as possible, it would only be a matter of time before it tripped us up.

So the goal of our talks was to unite the intentions of the elves. Zieden was a rather large country, so it would take a considerable amount of time to visit every settlement within it.

But there was no real need for us to hurry. Rather, right now Zieden was the one panicking in the pursuit of peace, so the elves held all the leverage at the negotiating table. If left to panic for too long, Zieden might lose control and go on a rampage, but I was sure Airena knew exactly how much rope she could give them.

So for now, I decided to enjoy traveling together with the caravan for a while. This was one of the places I could really relax and find peace of mind.

"What was it like in the East, Lord Acer?"

"Hello, Lord Acer. My name is Rajend, from the Kuki Forest. It is a great honor to meet you in person."

That said, between answering the questions of everyone I knew and being

introduced to whoever I didn't, it would be a while before I could actually relax.



From atop my horse, I drew back an arrow and let it loose. The arrow cut through the air, embedding itself deep in the armored soldier's forehead. If it had been human, such a blow would have destroyed the brain and been instantly fatal. The impact made the approaching soldier stumble, but it didn't stop its advance. Though my target was a soldier clad in armor, it was not human. Or perhaps more accurately, it was no longer human.

"I really don't like revenants."

Revenants were monsters born from the corpses of people. Though they were supposed to be rather rare, there were currently three coming toward us.

I loosed another arrow. Being already dead, there wasn't much value in targeting their vitals. The only way to defeat revenants was to inflict as much damage to their flesh as possible. This arrow took a revenant in the leg, causing it to fall to the ground.

As far as monsters went, they were pretty weak. Though they were physically strong and hard to kill, they were quite slow and had no intelligence at all. As long as you didn't let your guard down or get close to them, dealing with them wasn't especially challenging. Even an ordinary human could just run away.

That said, fighting against them was distinctly unpleasant. Their existence itself was off-putting, and being forced to do so much damage to their bodies felt disrespectful to the dead. The other elves in the caravan loosed a barrage of arrows, bringing the remaining revenants to the ground. Though they weren't especially threatening, no one said a word.

They might have been taken down, but they would soon be back on their feet, so we still needed to finish them off. I supposed I should at least finish off the one I knocked over.

Three months had passed since I joined up with the elven caravan again.

We were currently traveling through southern Zieden, land which had once been part of Kirkoim. During my time here, I had learned that as powerful as

Zieden was, they had pushed themselves quite hard to accomplish their wartime feats. Things were better near the towns and villages, but monsters were becoming extremely prevalent out in the open country. We encountered plenty even as we traveled down the roads in carriages, so I imagined things would be even worse if we were to leave the roads and travel the fields and forests.

The emergence of more monsters was likely due to Zieden focusing its military on wartime efforts. While a few soldiers had been left in each settlement to protect them, with their numbers depleted, they could barely keep those towns and cities safe. Heading out to proactively hunt monsters was out of the question. Or perhaps adventurers had been pressed into wartime service.

Either way, the number of wild monsters was gradually growing. That would inevitably lead to a stagnation in travel and trade, thus causing a decline in quality of life for everyone. This would leave Zieden with even fewer countries willing to trade with them. I'd even heard of kingdoms that had fallen because of excessive proliferation of monsters within their borders. I had no idea why Zieden had devoted so much of its resources to waging war.

When something like that happened, the surrounding nations needed to band together to exterminate the monsters. Otherwise, the number of monsters would continue to grow until those nations, too, would become overrun. I really wanted to believe that Zieden's rulers weren't foolish enough to let that happen.

What had spurred them on to war with no regard for the consequences? There had to be a reason. And what could we do to stop them? I didn't like the thought of leaving it to someone else, but I was sure Airena would be able to find out.

We were about halfway through our journey across the elven forests in Zieden. After another three months, we would turn from the northern forests to the capital of Zieden, to the city of Jingar whose gates I had sealed shut. Apparently, they had yet to clear out the mountains I had created. I guessed it would fall upon me to get rid of them. The other elves in the caravan might be able to manage if they all worked together, but if Zieden saw how long it would

take them to do so, they might start to look down on them. By clearing them away in an instant, I could maintain the threatening image the elves held in Zieden's eyes, all while making another huge display of my own power.

However, once that was done, I would have no place at the negotiating table. Besides, the negotiations wouldn't be concluded after a single meeting. The caravan would continue to travel around, making numerous trips back to the capital to continue talks, all while gathering the opinions of Ludoria, Vilestorika, and the Azueda Alliance.

How many years would it take to resolve the conflict? After the first round of talks, the caravan would head back to Ludoria, where I would probably part ways with them. I hadn't put much thought into what I would do after visiting Kaeha's grave, but I at least wanted to spend a little time with the Yosogi dojo.

The true ending to my long journey was finally close at hand.



I sat in front of a crackling campfire, eagerly awaiting what was to come. On the other side of the campfire, the other elves of the caravan were lined up to the left and the right, leaving an open space in the middle.

Emerging from the darkness, Piune walked directly toward the fire and up into the stage the elves had built for her. Seated among the rest, Huratio plucked at his lute three times, after which the other elves began to clap. In timing to the rhythm they set, Piune lifted her face to meet my gaze and smiled.

I felt a shiver run down my back. Of course, not one of displeasure by any means. All my anticipation had been stirred up by that one look, sending a shudder through my body.

At the same time, I noticed the deep red dress she was wearing. With the way the light of the fire played over it, it looked like she had wrapped herself in the flames.

In timing with Huratio's lute and the other elves' clapping, she started to move. At first slowly, but gradually faster and faster...and then she froze, and snapped right back into motion again.

Yes, this was every bit a dance for the sake of performance. The way she

grabbed the hem of her skirt and flipped it up like a cloak made it feel like the fire itself was dancing. The stark contrast between the red of her dress and the white of her skin stood out, but anything farther was perfectly hidden. The intensity of the flashing colors burned in the back of my mind.

It was quite the bold dance. Before my journey to the East, Piune had been unsure of how to live in human society. Her lack of self-confidence had been her most prominent trait...but it seemed she had long since put that behind her. Every little movement she made, from extending the tips of her fingers to the lifting of her toes, overflowed with confidence and pride.

Where on earth had she learned to dance like this? It was entirely unfamiliar to me. Not that I supposed it really mattered. I didn't know all that much about dancing to begin with. I was far more interested in learning about how she had practiced and perfected this dance for herself. I really wanted to hear the story of how she had worked hard to learn this over more than ten years. Of course, that could all wait until after I had enjoyed this performance.

It was unfortunate that, despite how incredible her dance was, I was the only spectator. The caravan wasn't engaging in any sort of trade or exchange with the humans in Zieden for the time being. There was a lot of tension between the humans and the elves right now. It was hard to say their relationship was in a good place.

The future of that relationship would be determined by the negotiations that came after consulting with the elders of various forests around the kingdom. As such, even to the common people, the elves couldn't afford to show a kind face. After being subjected to war for so long, being presented with the wealth and artistry of the elven caravan could give birth to darker intentions among the humans. Normally, the caravan's trade and inspirational art was meant to bring healing to exactly those kinds of people.

Right now, the elven caravan avoided human settlements as much as possible as they traveled across Zieden, staying for as short a time as they could when it was absolutely necessary. So unfortunately, as luxurious as it was for me, Piune's performance had been put on for my sake alone.

It really was incredible, though. The other elves told me that Piune had taken

up dancing because of my own suggestion...or I guess you could say my teasing, so maybe I could take a bit of pride in this accomplishment. After seeing how well she performed, I couldn't help but feel proud, knowing I had played a part in making it happen.

To be honest, this wasn't quite what I'd had in mind when I suggested she take up dancing. She had been much more reserved back then, so I had expected something gentler and more elegant. But seeing how she performed now, I realized that expectation had been too shallow of me.

I guess I couldn't really take much credit for this after all. That pride belonged to her, the one who worked hard to accomplish this, and to the one who had seen enough in her to suggest this style of dancing.

Had that person been Huratio? He was quite knowledgeable when it came to music. No, when it came to skill in judging people, Airenna was the first to come to mind.

Ah, I was really starting to get into it. Piune's vigorous dance was like the dancing of the fire spirits in a forge. I could feel a palpable heat stirred up by her dancing, powerful and beautiful.

Until the dance came to an end, I found myself totally enraptured by the performance.



After looping around the capital of Zieden, the caravan finally made its way inside. Of course, that was to clear out the three mountains blocking the city's entrances. Removing the blockades was at the same time like pulling a blade away from their throat, and also showing how easily the elves were able to do such a thing.

That said, if I weren't here, removing the mountains would have been quite a task for the caravan, and putting them back would be equally challenging. In order to make sure Zieden didn't realize that, we cleared the mountains out as soon as possible.

However, I had no place in the negotiations that would follow. In fact, I wouldn't even be present. That would require showing myself to the rulers of

Zieden, which could have a negative impact on my life in the future. Airena had warned me of such, and suggested I not get involved. Instead, I would stay back and guard the caravan.

She wasn't wrong, though. I preferred to travel alone across the continent, doing whatever struck my fancy. Making myself known to a bunch of politicians threatened that way of life. And never mind Airena herself, the other elves present wouldn't be able to treat me like an equal in such an official setting. Even if I wasn't discovered to be a high elf, the politicians might think I held incredible power among the elves and so begin to make my life miserable.

Sure, I'd have the option of simply leaving if I only had the spotlight within Zieden, but if the news got out to other countries, I would have to stay out away from the center of the continent for at least another two or three decades. I would have to wait until the political structure of the countries here went through enough generations to eventually forget about me.

That would unfortunately also result in me being forgotten by the people I wanted to remember me. Right now, the people I knew from the Yosogi school, like Shizuki and his children, were still probably alive and well. But after another thirty years, it wouldn't be strange if everyone I knew was gone. That would be far too sad.

Someday, that would happen anyway. There was no stopping it. But that time didn't have to be now, and it didn't have to be in thirty years. I would be more than happy to put that off for another century or two.

Sitting around in the wagons doing nothing was a bit boring, though, so my thoughts turned to Win. I had the letters he'd left with Airena on hand, after all.

Win and I had parted ways...I guess it was about thirty years ago now. He would be sixty-two years old now, which put him in his midtwenties in human terms. There wasn't much point in the comparison anymore, but by human standards, he would actually be older than me now.

Back when I was still staying at the dojo, I would get a letter from him every year or two. Sometimes it would take longer, but I imagined some messages had been lost along the way. Sending letters across long distances was actually quite difficult in this world. The price of sending them was steep, and there was

no guarantee it would actually be successfully delivered.

On top of that, there was no way to learn if it had been delivered afterward. There was nothing stopping the courier from pocketing the money and discarding the letter at their earliest convenience. Even if they seriously intended to deliver the letter, they could be attacked by bandits or monsters on the journey. If they were sent by sea or were carried by multiple couriers, there was a chance it could get lost along the way. In this world, your only option was to send the letter off and hope.

The letters I had from Win were full of holes—in terms of details, anyway—and couldn't tell me anything about where he was, or what he was doing. But it did tell me the most important thing of all: that he was still out there somewhere. That made me happier than anything.

South of the Great Pulha Woodlands, there was a bit of land before you reached the sea. It was small enough that no country had laid claim to it, but large enough to provide passage to the west of the continent. This empty land was called the Pulha Highway, allowing people to travel between the western and eastern sides of the forest.

Although it was called a highway, it didn't actually have any maintained roads. The land was inhabited by those who loathed the idea of associating themselves with any state, as well as criminals and others with nowhere else to go, and was often stalked by monsters emerging from the Woodlands in search of food.

There were virtually no merchants willing to brave the trek across the Pulha Highway. Rather than risk going on foot, it was much faster and safer to go by ship. And yet, Win had apparently decided to take that route on his journey west. Was it to test himself, or to gain real combat experience before the trials he knew he would face?

It wasn't a bad idea at all. Challenging the Great Woodlands themselves would have been too reckless, but he would likely be capable of handling any monsters that emerged onto the Highway.

Realistically speaking, there was far greater danger from the people who

inhabited the land. They were far more cunning than any monster, and might go to any lengths to achieve their aims. For Win, who had yet to take another person's life as far as I knew, it would be quite an ordeal. The letters he sent said nothing of the trials he faced in his crossing, nor how he overcame them. At any rate, he somehow made it through to the western side of the Woodlands.

By the way, apparently I had suffered from a small misconception about the makeup of the continent. The land immediately west of Pulha didn't actually belong to the continent's western region. Pulha was situated almost exactly in the center of the continent, so the land on both sides of it was considered to be the central region. I had assumed that the area I was familiar with was the entirety of the continent's central region, but apparently there was about as much land to the west of Pulha as to the east.

However, the western side of the central region—for simplicity's sake, the west-central region—seemed to have a mix of cultures from the actual western region and the east-central region of the continent. For example, the religion that held humans as supreme over all other races fought for dominance against the religion I was familiar with which worshipped the harvest god and declared all people to be equal as children of the earth. Each country ascribed to one of these religions, and their differences had led to wars between them.

It gave Win a chance to experience the culture of the continent's western region before actually stepping foot in it. But even so, he continued west. He had avoided entering any human kingdoms on his journey, as the only nonhumans those countries permitted within their borders were slaves. Apparently there were even elves among the enslaved races there.

I imagined the techniques the old nobles of Ludoria had used to enslave elves had come from the West, then. The idea of missionaries from the West making their way into Ludoria and connecting with the nobles to establish a foothold here sounded too probable to ignore. What had Win thought about all these things?

However, after the point where he began avoiding the human kingdoms, more gaps appeared in his letters. After arriving in the West, he made friends with the beastfolk. I didn't know the details, but apparently he had gotten

involved in their war with the humans.

According to Win, the beastfolk divided themselves into the Horned Tribe, a group prioritizing knowledge, and the Fanged Tribe, those prioritizing warfare. Though my understanding of them was vague at best, perhaps it was something similar to the distinction between herbivores and carnivores.

Win's first acquaintances in the West belonged to the Fanged Tribe. They—actually, Win referred to his acquaintance as “she,” so I supposed he had met a woman there—apparently covered themselves with the hides of animals, hid their faces behind masks, and fought with the ferocity of wild animals.

They possessed physical abilities far exceeding those of humans. But even so, they were apparently on the losing side of the war. This was due to the difference in numbers and equipment. One-on-one, the Fanged Tribe could easily overpower any humans. But when the humans fought in formation, clad in steel armor and armed with spears, the Fanged Tribe were all but powerless against them.

The heavy armor the humans wore meant they were quite slow, so even defeat rarely ended with the Fanged Tribe suffering heavy losses, but they were gradually losing ground and being enslaved by the encroaching armies.

Using metal weapons stolen from the humans, the beastfolk could easily overcome the steel armor, but the amount of weaponry they could realistically take from their opponents was far from enough to fight back on any sort of scale. And with the way they relied on physical strength to survive, they hadn't developed the techniques and technologies needed to create those weapons for themselves.

But in their time of need, none other than Win appeared before them. Swooping in and rescuing the daughter of a powerful warrior among the Fanged Tribe, his exploits had overruled any demerit his half-human heritage might have earned him. And above all, he brought with him what they wanted most of all: the skills to craft weapons. Not only had it not come from humans, but it was something he had learned from the dwarves who were far superior as smiths.

I didn't know Win's current situation in the West, nor how he felt about anything that had happened there. His many letters left out the majority of details, describing only the events that happened in the broadest strokes. Shortly after, his letters omitted even these, containing only messages to say that he was still alive and doing well.

I imagined he was thoroughly embroiled in the war with the humans. Was he afraid of the letter falling into human hands, and thus leaking important information?

One thing he did include in his letters was the desire to have another match with me. Ah, I felt very much the same way. He was surely much stronger now than he had been, and would only grow stronger as time went on. An exchange of words and swordsmanship would be a far better vehicle for sharing our thoughts and feelings than letters could ever be.

Though as of yet, I had no idea when we'd get the chance.



Though maybe it didn't matter much, humans were rather special as a race, in a way. To explain why, I'd have to go back to the time when the different races that populated this world were first created.

Most of them were created by the gods, though there were six exceptions: the spirits, the high elves, the giants living above the clouds, the phoenixes, the true dragons, and of course the gods themselves. These six races were born from the hands of the Creator himself.

When the gods first began creating races, they formed the elves based on the high elves. So while elves were the closest thing to high elves in the world, they were still quite far removed. Perhaps it isn't the best metaphor, but if the high elves were dolls carved from wood, the elves were like fired pottery fashioned in the same image.

Next, the gods made the dwarves, a race entirely opposite the elves. Despite being so thoroughly opposed, using the same metaphor as before, they were still fashioned from the same pottery. Thus they were significantly closer to the elves than either were to the high elves.

Taking the experience they had gained from making the elves and the dwarves, the gods then fashioned humans. They had neither the sensitivity required to commune with the spirits nor the innate robustness and strength of the dwarves, and ended up with much shorter life spans. The gods had likely planned to create the races that would follow using humans as a template, so they seemed to focus on giving them the ability to be easily enhanced rather than any strong power of their own. At least, that was my conjecture.

Each of the gods would go on to create races of their own that were independent of the others, using humanity as a base to build upon. There were many who believed that the races which followed in creation were made from actual humans. A good example would be the beastfolk, who had animal traits added to them to compensate for their inherent weakness.

Of course, if you told the beastfolk that, they'd be furious. Actually, even the elves, dwarves, and humans would feel insulted by this story. But even so, it was the truth.

In short, the religion in the West that taught human supremacy wasn't entirely baseless, though whether the adherents of that religion would appreciate the reason for that or not was a different story.

Again, humans were somewhat special as a race. That was probably related to why most half-breeds were some other race mixed with humans. Unfortunately, as a high elf, it was entirely meaningless to me.

However, this story of creation only accounts for the birth of the races we would call "people." The creation of plants and animals is still shrouded in mystery. They most likely already existed from the beginning, or if the Creator made the world itself, he fashioned them as part of it.

After finishing their first round of negotiations with Zieden, the elven caravan headed west toward Ludoria. The talks had reached the conclusion that Zieden would not interfere with the elven forests in any way, and they also laid the groundwork for future negotiations to take place. In short, in exchange for removing the mountains that sealed Jingar's gates, they had been forced to accept a number of demands from the elves.

Of course, they had also brought up their displeasure with the continent's current political climate and the rise in monster populations within their kingdom, so the real negotiations would begin soon. But before that, it seemed Airena intended to visit with officials from Ludoria and Vilestorika.

To be quite honest, things were operating on such a large scale that I had difficulty keeping track of them. Well, I suppose my meeting with the mystics of the Ancient Gold Empire and the golden dragon were technically even larger in scale. That conversation had sent Airena reeling. However, political negotiations were so far removed from me, I couldn't help but see them as large happenings.

I guess I was saying that it was best for us to stick to our own areas of expertise. Airena had probably been more bothered by the danger I had been in than by the scope of the story I'd told her.

As a former adventurer, she had a strong sense of curiosity. When I had told her that I had found a lead on reaching the giants, and so finding the white lake she was searching for, she had been incredibly happy.

"So it will mean meeting the giants? I suppose we will need a gift then, to avoid offending them. Though I cannot imagine any appropriate gift could be something we would be able to carry ourselves," she had said with a laugh. The fact she held no inhibitions about meeting with these giants showed just how much of a strange elf she was.

Leaving Zieden behind, the caravan made its way into Ludoria's eastern end. As expected, the border was crowded with a number of newly built fortresses. Though Ludoria maintained trade with Zieden after the latter had invaded Kirkoim, it was clear they were still on guard.

While being cautious, the nobles to the east were avoiding direct contact with Zieden. After all, if war broke out between Ludoria and Zieden, it would be those eastern lands that suffered first. While the majority of nobles in Ludoria were encouraging a passive, wait-and-see approach to the situation, there were some who were calling for a deeper alliance with Zieden and war with Vilestorika in the south.

Of course, the nobles living in the south were doing the exact opposite, calling for war with Zieden and an alliance with Vilestorika. Though they were clearly

operating based on the interests of themselves and their land rather than the good of the kingdom as a whole, they weren't necessarily in the wrong for doing so. Even if the kingdom as a whole profited greatly, if it cost them the lives of their people and turned their territory into a wasteland, victory wouldn't mean all that much.

The royalty was also biding its time, but they seemed to favor the views of the eastern nobles. Given what I had heard from Airena, the royal family held a great deal of land in the east thanks to the previous incident there. This chunk of land had become a critical piece of support for them. If that region were to be embroiled in war, the royal family would lose a great deal of power.

Beyond that, the eastern region of Ludoria produced much of the kingdom's food. Setting fire to that land would threaten the kingdom with widespread famine. Any decision that could threaten the eastern region of the kingdom was one the royalty would have difficulty making. Just as the nobles prioritized their own land above the good of the kingdom, the royalty prioritized the stability of the kingdom over the safety of those around them.

Even if it meant war and famine for other nations, the role of politicians was to ensure that burden never fell on their own people. Perhaps that was all obvious, but even so, acting in pursuit of that goal didn't always lead to making the best choice. There was no guarantee that the fire in your neighbor's house wouldn't spread to yours.

Passing through farmlands in the east, we headed deeper into the kingdom, gradually approaching a very familiar city: Wolfir, the capital of Ludoria. It was a large, old, and prosperous city.

This was where I would part ways with the caravan. Of course, we wouldn't be apart forever. If they ever needed my help, I'd come running back, though it was quite likely I'd be returning to ask for *their* help.

I still remembered my way around the streets of Wolfir, so I followed them directly to my destination. Climbing the stairs and passing through the front gate, I found a crowd of unfamiliar faces practicing a very familiar form of swordsmanship.

But I didn't stop there. As I headed deeper in, some of the newer students moved to stop me, but they were held back by the older ones.

I recognized those faces, though they were quite a bit older than when I had last seen them. I could celebrate our reunion later, though. As I passed through the dojo, none of my old acquaintances held me up. They all knew exactly where I'd be heading first.

She hadn't been laid to rest in the city graveyard but in a family grave built right here in the dojo. Standing in front of her, I put down my bags and stretched. I was finally here.

I had come such a long way, and had probably taken a few too many detours, but they had all been valuable. At last, facing her headstone, I began to talk.

"Hi. I finally made it back."

Her grave had been kept perfectly clean. It looked as if not even a single day had passed since I last saw it. Just like always, Kaeha was here waiting for me.

What *had* changed, though, was my own heart. On that day, when I had sat here unable to bring myself to move, it was her letter that had pushed me forward. So I forced myself to set a goal, to travel eastward.

I had seen all sorts of things and met all sorts of people. I felt the difference in the wind from riding on a horse's back and riding on a sailing ship, and I climbed a tree so high I could look down on the world from above the clouds. I had seen the vivid green of the grasslands, a land covered in black ash, and the glittering golden scales of a dragon. I had witnessed the pride of the grassland nomads, the grandeur of the perspective of the immortal mystics, and the strength of the people of Fusou. I had taught swordsmanship to a group of children, clashed weapons with a good friend, and walked alongside a couple separated by vastly different worlds and life spans.

My journey hadn't made me forget my sorrows. Rather, it had finally taught me to face them head-on. It had been such a great journey.

On my return, witnessing what had changed and what had remained the same also taught me how much I had grown. As if to confirm all these things for myself, I retold my story in front of Kaeha's grave. I talked about how much I

had changed, to she who would never change again.

And I would once again move forward. After telling the important stories I had learned to the people in the dojo, and after a little bit of a rest...I would be heading for the Forest Depths.

I would once again be visiting my homeland in the depths of the Great Pulha Woodlands.



Excerpt — Dripping Memories

Blessings of the Forest and the Taste of Bread

As a race that lived in harmony with the forest, elves didn't use fire for much of anything. Starting a fire in a forest always came with the risk of sparking a disaster. Of course, there were some situations in which fire was absolutely necessary for survival, and so for those cases, it was permitted within a highly restricted area.

After living in the elven village in Ha Forest for a few months, there was no doubt that I used that area more than anyone else. In fact, I was probably using it more than every other elf in the settlement combined. If I had been an ordinary elf, I would have faced no small amount of scolding for it, but my status as a high elf spared me from that fate.

For the record, I limited myself to using fire only once every two days at most...but I couldn't bear anything more than that. I just really wanted to eat cooked food.

Even for something as simple as an apple, the difference between eating it raw or cooked was huge. It wasn't that one was better than the other, but it would get tiring to only ever eat them the same way. On top of that, some foods like mushrooms and potatoes absolutely needed to be cooked.

The children in the village—and Shiez in particular—seemed quite interested in what I was doing, but if they copied me they'd get an angry earful from the adults. All of this resulted from my own selfishness, so I did feel bad about it. However, faced with the restraint they showed in not chastising me for my behavior, I was reminded of my first meeting with Airena, and how strange she had been for not showing anything similar. That weirdness of hers was something I had come to rely on, and quite liked about her.

But anyway.

"Lord Acer, what are you doing today?" Shiez asked, peering curiously at my

hands. However, I answered only with a smile and continued my work.

I was doing something rather special for a forest settlement.

A little while ago, I had been out near a human city, using the wind spirits to listen in on the local rumors. On my way back, I found a carriage being attacked by monsters. As a carriage carrying food into the city from local villages, it didn't have anything like an escort, leaving the drivers to fend for themselves using long wooden poles in place of spears.

The monsters harassing them were fairly weak—a kind of hyena not much stronger than any wild dog or wolf—so it was quite possible the villagers accompanying the carriage would have been able to drive them off. But there was always the possibility one of them would get killed, or one of the horses would get injured and so trap them here.

My intentions in Zieden were to avoid human settlements as much as possible, and thus avoid human contact, but I wasn't about to let someone die right in front of me. I immediately drew my sword and dived into battle, slaying the monsters and quickly turning to first aid for those who were injured. They had been incredibly grateful for my help, and were quite apologetic that they didn't really have anything to reward me with as thanks, only able to share with me a little of the wheat they were carrying.

The wheat had already been finely ground, and was ready for sale in town. Of course, I hadn't really needed anything from them as thanks, and didn't expect them to have the surplus to spare. If they had, they would have hired an escort. So if they had offered me any amount of money, no matter how small, I would have refused it. I wasn't an adventurer. I didn't kill monsters for the pay.

But they had decided to reward me with some of the goods they were carrying. I was still hesitant to accept such a gift, but in the end, it would make both of us feel better. After requesting that they tell no one of our meeting, I returned to Ha Forest, thinking all the while how I was going to use this rare gift of flour.

I guess bread made the most sense. With my poor culinary skills, there wasn't much else I could do with the stuff. Either way, I hadn't had bread for a while

either, so I set about gathering some ingredients around the forest. And that brings me to today. Yes, the special task before me today was making bread.

That said, with no yeast available to me here in the forest, my only option was to make unleavened bread. Besides that, I also only had pans to work with, so I decided to make something like roti or chapati. I imagined something like that would still be plenty novel for the elves.

The flour I had been given was dark in color, indicating it had been ground with the shells and buds included. Calling it “whole wheat” made it sound nice, but realistically it just meant the village didn’t have the technology or equipment to produce white flour. Even so, a culture capable of grinding down grains to make them easier to eat was still plenty advanced in my eyes. I couldn’t say who had first come up with the idea, but it definitely wouldn’t have come from someone who was happy to live off the bounty of the forest.

Mixing ground wheat together with salt and a little warm water, and then kneading it, transformed it into dough. The oils in the wheat buds made it somewhat difficult to bring the mixture all together, but a bit of patience and persistence got the job done.

In the end, I was more of a consumer than a cook. My goal wasn’t perfection, but to enjoy the process and hopefully produce something reasonably edible.

After kneading the dough, I added some oil from the fruits found in the forest and let it sit for about an hour. While I waited, I started mixing some honey with milk...oh, by the way, it wasn’t like cow’s milk or goat’s milk. Elves didn’t keep livestock, so there were no sheep, goats, or cows around to obtain milk from. Instead, it was drawn from pressing the branches of a certain tree the elves called a “milk tree.”

Compared to humans, elves grew very slowly, so the amount of time when they needed to consume milk was much longer. But the amount of time an elven mother could produce her own milk varied widely, and in many cases, her body would stop producing it before the baby was weaned. That was the case for humans as well, of course, but the time frame was much longer for elves, and the chances of there being no other mothers who could produce milk in

their stead was much higher. In such cases, the milk tree became necessary.

Though it was a tree, its branches were more like an ivy, being soft and pliable and hanging quite low. If you put a branch in your mouth and sucked on it, you'd get a fluid much like milk out of it. It wasn't a Spirit Tree, but it still had rare and mysterious properties. Humans referred to them as Mother Trees, considering them a blessing from the harvest god.

Of course, the milk tree didn't provide milk out of the kindness of its heart. The beasts of the forest were equally attracted by the tree's bounty and would gather, fight, and kill each other over it. The blood shed and broken bodies fallen around the trees would then provide sustenance for them, allowing them to produce more milk.

So when elves hunted monsters in the forest, they would bury their remains around milk trees so that they could obtain milk from them if needed for their children. Or if they just wanted some for themselves, of course.

Mixing that milk with some honey created a softly sweet mixture, which I thought would be the perfect match for the bread I was making. After the dough had finished setting, I cut it into appropriate-sized pieces and added some powdered flour to it as I stretched it out. All that was left was to fry it up, and the bread would be done.

The whole process made me realize, though, that I was much happier to eat food made for me by someone else than to make it myself. I didn't mind doing it myself from time to time, but it wasn't something I'd like to do again the next day. I would probably be content with eating fruit like normal, or maybe I'd look for some meat.

The smell of cooking bread brought a number of curious elves around to look, both children and adults alike. Quite a few more than I had expected, actually. I had expected the children to come, so I had made quite a bit of dough, but maybe it still hadn't been enough.

Above all, I'd make sure Shiez got some, since he had been watching me from start to finish. And of course I'd take some for myself next. I had made it because I wanted to eat it, after all. If I didn't end up getting any, it would have all been pointless.

At any rate, I was curious how the elves living here would take to the taste of bread.

Treasure Left by a Friend

“Mister Acer! Let’s! Go! Treasure hunting!!!”

As I was sitting after breakfast, wondering how I was going to spend my weekly day off, my worries were blown away by Aina practically jumping...okay, actually quite literally jumping into the room. Learning much of anything from Aina was going to be a challenge while she was this excited, but in short order she was followed in by Sheyne, who gave me an apologetic look after seeing what was happening.

I see, I see. I had no idea what was going on yet, but it appeared something Sheyne said had gotten Aina quite excited, and so she had raced off to find me. She had said something about hunting for treasure...yeah, I could see Aina being excited about something like that. It was the kind of romantic notion I was pretty fond of too.

“I’m sorry, Acer. When I mentioned my grandmother had hidden some treasure, she got quite excited...”

I shook my head at Sheyne’s apology with a smile. I’d never be upset with a child asking me to play with them. Rather, I was quite happy if they liked me enough to ask. And besides, if it was a treasure hidden by Nonna, I couldn’t help but be curious myself.

Of course, letting Aina be rude with guests like this wasn’t good for her sake. Sheyne would no doubt scold her for this, and I had no intention of getting in the way.

“I’ll probably go out hunting with her for it later, then. Would you mind telling me what you know about it?” However, I was still happy to be invited, and wanted her to understand that I fully intended to accept it.

Sheyne seemed relieved at my words, but nevertheless grabbed Aina by the scruff of her neck and dragged her out of the room. While I waited for the lecture to be over, I decided to take a walk and enjoy the morning air.

“They were friends of mine a long time ago, but I’m sure they haven’t changed one bit. I hid my most precious treasure under their favorite food. So Sheyne, whether it’s you or your children or even your grandchildren, if you find it you can keep it for yourselves. Feel free to search for it.”

That was the message Nonna had left for Sheyne while she was still alive, back before Aina had been born. Although Sheyne had searched for the treasure herself once, she had failed to find it and eventually forgot.

However, when thinking back on the friends from long ago that “haven’t changed one bit,” the thought occurred to her that Nonna might have been talking about me and Win. She had murmured her discovery out loud without thinking, triggering the excitement that followed.

As Aina pulled me rather forcibly by the arm through the streets of Janpemon, I thought over the problem. If I were to hide a precious treasure, where would I put it? Maybe some place where the complicated network of streets rarely brought anyone, or a mountain some distance away?

No, those were both quite unlikely. If she had left it somewhere like that, anyone could have come across it and taken it. Yes, if I were in her position, I’d want to be able to confirm no one else had taken it, and put it somewhere no one would find it by accident. So I would probably hide it under the floor or in the attic of my own house.

If I needed somewhere huge to store a vast treasure, or if it were something shady that would cause problems if it were traced back to me, I would consider caves deep in the mountains or uninhabited islands. I highly doubted Nonna’s treasure was anything of that scale, though. And with the inn being rebuilt in her lifetime, she would have any number of places to hide her treasure inside it.

However, an inn received countless guests over time. There were only so many private places for her inside it. She would have had to hide it somewhere like that. So unfortunately for Aina, who was quite passionate about searching around town, the chance of us finding it by walking randomly like this were next to zero.

“I think the cake shop is suspicious! I remember Great-Grandma really liked

tarts!”

But her proud way of showing her deductions was so adorable, I couldn’t help but want to tag along with her escapades. Today was my day off, so going out for tarts wasn’t a bad idea either.

Though, now that I thought about it, the idea of checking the tart shop wasn’t all that bad. Win and I both loved fruit tarts. And if I recall, the shop that made the tarts we liked using fruit from Ardeno had been recommended by Nonna herself. But as much as we liked them, I didn’t think it had anything to do with—well, actually, maybe it did.

Quite a long time ago, I had talked with Nonna about our favorite foods. Nonna had recommended this place, so we had brought Win along. Back then, I hadn’t really shared what my favorite food was, but I’d mentioned that elves liked apples in general.

At that time, she had seemed to sink deep into thought.

“Oh, so elves like apples. If we start making more dishes with apples, will we get more elves as customers?”

I remembered her saying something like that. I was probably the only one left who remembered that story...and so I could start to guess at what the treasure was.

It was the kind of thing you’d never find unless you had Win or I to look for it with you. Even if Win didn’t remember the conversation, if he could guess at the nature of the treasure, he could use the spirits to help him find it. In other words, without Win or I to acknowledge them, no one would be able to find it. There was only one thing I could think of that would fit.

“Hey, Aina. If I remember, you guys have an apple tree in your backyard, don’t you?” I asked, mostly to confirm what I already knew. Behind the new, larger inn, the backyard had a single apple tree.

“Yeah, but the apples it grows are really sour. They don’t taste good at all. Oh, but Mom cooks them sometimes, and then they’re really good!” Aina’s expression lit up as she recalled the apple syrup her mother would make from the fruit. I had no doubt her head was entirely dominated by the thought of

sweets, and she had almost entirely forgotten about the treasure. I guess we'd have to knock out the tarts first.

I wouldn't be letting this treasure go, though. I could check the answers for myself later if I had to.

With the help of the spirits, I managed to dig up a tiny, tiny box buried among the roots of the apple tree behind the inn without harming it. The contents were exactly what I had expected: a pendant made from gold and silver, inlaid with a raw garnet. Win had found the stone, and I had made the pendant to fit around it, making it a present to her from both of us.

With her eyes shining at the discovery of quite a real treasure, I put the pendant around Aina's neck. Nonna had said that whoever found the treasure could keep it for themselves. She didn't want to take it to her grave, but for someone to carry it forward for her. But even then, only if Win or I gave them permission. In that case, I was more than happy to accede to my late friend's wishes.

I didn't know what Aina would do with the pendant. She might end up letting go of it at some point, but I didn't mind. Of course, I would be happier if she treasured it, but as long as she understood how precious it had been to Nonna, that would be enough. I didn't know how Win would feel about the whole thing, but that would be a question for when he returned from his journey.

"Does it look good on me, Mister Acer?" Aina's face lit with a huge smile as she puffed out her chest to show off her new treasure, but of course it didn't suit a young child like her.



Besides that, it was far too valuable to be worn around by a child, so Sheyne would probably have to hold on to it for a while. The silver had also started to tarnish after being left underground for so long, so I wanted to polish it up for her a bit first.

But once Aina had grown, it would no doubt look stunning on her...though I couldn't say whether I'd ever get to witness it for myself.

Without a word, I patted Aina on the head, dodging the question.

Promise

"So an order for potato seedlings, moss, and mushrooms from the kingdom of the dwarves, and a ship to send them to the Ancient Gold Empire. Understood."

On our way back to Ludoria, while preparing the business arrangements for the caravan, I wrote down a number of things on a list and gave it to Airena. I was making arrangements to send some goods to Wanggui Xuannu in Black Snow Province as I had promised.

"Yeah, and I'll have the instructions for growing them written down to send along with them by the time we reach Ludoria. Oh, right. I also want to send one more thing."

The land in Black Snow Province was covered in volcanic ash, preventing most plants from growing. Even if they were able to put roots down in the ash, the young plants would be buried by newly fallen ash before they could grow. So my plan was to have Xuannu raise potatoes, mosses, and mushrooms that grew underground in the dwarven kingdom under her own castle. Black Snow Province had limited access to water, but the well I had dug for them should have handled most of that issue for them.

"I have to admit, all this talk of a country ruled by mystics and a dragon, and it being the largest nation in the Far East of the continent...it sounds like something right out of a storybook. If you weren't the one telling me, I likely wouldn't have believed it was real," Airena said with a laugh. I had to laugh along with her. If I hadn't seen it all with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe most of it either. Thinking of it that way, I was really impressed Airena could accept

all of it just based on my testimony.

There were two letters I wanted sent along with the goods. One was addressed to Xuannu, containing details on how to raise the plants I was sending. The second was to another mystic I had grown close to in my time there: the governor of White River Province, Baimao Laojun. The contents included the information I had gleaned from analyzing the relics taken from the assassins Odine had sent after me. It was a record of what I had learned about the rituals they used and the craftsmanship of the tools they inscribed them on, both from the perspective of a mage and a blacksmith. Just as Kawshman had been my partner in creating relics, Laojun was also a friend working in the same field.

Of course, a ship sent from Vilestorika or Dolbogarde would land in Blue Sea Province, so neither would be delivered directly to their intended recipients. So instead, I had addressed them to the governor of Blue Sea Province, Zhang Shegong. He was another mystic, so he should have been willing to pass the goods along to their proper destinations.

But, thinking about it now, sending my analysis of the relics taken from Odine's military abroad was exactly what Odine's government had been afraid of. Of course, they were more likely thinking of said information leaking to Zieden, Ludoria, or Vilestorika. That same information traveling to the Ancient Gold Empire in the Far East would have little impact on them. Still, I guess you could say that the military had made the right choice in trying to chase me down...not counting the actual results they ended up with.

"Fusou was equally incredible. There were the oni, a race descended from what were probably human demons that we thought extinct, and a tree that reached up above the clouds. The ones who protected the demons there and planted that enormous tree were the giants who lived in the sky."

My next destination after the Ancient Gold Empire had been Fusou, and though it was much smaller, it had just as many mysteries about it. The land of Fusou, where humans, merfolk, and skyfolk banded together and warred against the oni. But none of that was important to Airen.

"Basically, that means the world in the clouds where the giants were said to

live is real. I have no doubt that the white lake you asked me to find is up there.”

For a brief moment, I could see her start to shake as she closed her eyes, as if overcome by something. Was it the thought of the white lake she had yet to witness? Or was it the memory of her two companions, who had hoped to see it together with her? Of course, I had no intention of intruding on that moment, so I quietly waited for her to finish.

Her curiosity as an adventurer and her love for her departed companions were an integral part of who she was. But now that she was the head of the elven caravan, she no longer had the freedom of an adventurer. That was all the more reason I wanted to take her to see the white lake above the clouds.

Thanks to her work with the elven caravan, the presence of the elves was being felt more strongly here in the center of the continent. The problem with Zieden was only starting on the path toward a solution, but even that would have been impossible without the caravan. I was really grateful for her, so it was only natural that I wanted to grant a wish or two she might have. And luckily for me, her wish was one that I was perhaps uniquely capable of fulfilling.

After a long pause, Airenna finally spoke again. “I’m sorry. I really asked something quite unreasonable of you. But thank you, Lord Acer.”

When she finally wiped her eyes and opened them, her face was beaming.



I hadn't even made her wish come true yet, and she was already this happy. What kind of expression would she make when we actually got there? Of course, I also wanted to see the world in the sky and meet the giants for myself, but I was far more interested in making Airena happy—a girl levelheaded and reliable enough to realize we needed to bring a present as a way of greeting when we met the giants, yet unique enough to be worried about it so far in advance.

Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

That Strange Guest

Forestfolk. To people like us, born in the Ancient Gold Empire, they were a special race that served the emperor directly. They rarely left Ancient Gold Province, so normal people rarely ever met them, but they held a position higher than that of even the provincial officials. Their prestige was only natural, as they had served the one and only emperor the Ancient Gold Empire had ever known since the beginning. So when I was first asked by a friend to take a forestfolk on board, I was immediately ready to complain about the suffering he was about to put me through.

Most people from other countries would think our heads were in the clouds if we told them our emperor was a holy mystic. And honestly, not too many of the Empire's people believed it either. But any merchant born here and familiar with foreign nations understood better than most that there was something off about the Ancient Gold Empire.

Countries were generally rather vague, fragile things. They were similar to the weather. They were large in scale, so looking up at them from below gave the impression that they would last forever, but it didn't take much to make them fall apart, and they always did eventually. No matter how stable a country was, no sunny day lasted forever. Before you knew it, clouds had rolled in and rain had started to fall.

Even the most stable nations had to deal with the deaths of their rulers and the wide impact it had on their societies. Succession wars, dispersion of authority to nobles and other powerful families, corruption among government officials, internal conflict, threats from other nations...there were countless elements that, though they might not topple a nation by themselves, all shook its stability. At the very least, every human kingdom I knew of was like that.

But the Ancient Gold Empire was different. It had existed before the histories

of every other nation currently standing, and it had never suffered so much as a hint of instability. There had been a few small incidents, of course, but nothing on a scale that threatened the entire Empire. In fact, according to some literature, those very incidents had been intentionally instigated to efficiently restructure and rejuvenate the political system. I couldn't imagine anything like that in a human kingdom.

So, as a merchant who traveled to all sorts of foreign nations and made friends all over the world, I could recognize just how strange the Ancient Gold Empire really was. It wasn't all that hard to believe such an Empire was ruled by a holy mystic. And the forestfolk were especially close to the emperor, meaning they might have even had personal connections to him. I knew the challenges in traveling the seas, so it was only natural I would balk at the idea of having one of those forestfolk on board. In fact, I had wanted to avoid meeting one at all.

But now that I had been asked, I couldn't just refuse. Even if both would end up leaving a negative impression, the difference between accepting their request and giving them a bad experience was far different from refusing their request outright. Though I knew it would be a pain, I didn't have any choice but to accept.

I knew that the forestfolk—or “elves,” as they were called in the center of the continent—didn't associate much with humans. I had even heard rumors that farther west, elves were sold as slaves. But I was born in the Ancient Gold Empire, so no matter what anyone else called them, they were all forestfolk to me.

Apparently there had been an incident before I was born where some merchant from the West had tried to sell an elven slave here in the Ancient Gold Empire. It had caused no small amount of violence. When I was a kid, veteran sailors had told me the heroic story of how the merchant's ship had been sunk and the forestfolk had been rescued and brought to Ancient Gold Province. That was how the merchants of the Ancient Gold Empire thought of the forestfolk.

As for today, the particular forestfolk I was introduced to was a rather peculiar guy. I was pretty confident in my ability to judge people, but unless my

eyes deceived me, this forestfolk was also an accomplished warrior. He was reasonably stable on his feet despite the swaying of the ship and seemed quite knowledgeable about martial arts.

However, he didn't have the same dangerous aura of other warriors, nor the scent of blood on him. Together with the way he gawked at everything on board, he seemed more like a curious child, so it was hard to pin down his character. Judging by his clothes and his name, he didn't seem to be from the Ancient Gold Empire.

At the very least, it didn't seem like he would be a huge hassle to have around, and that was enough for me. I gave the order to set sail. We would only be with each other for a short time anyway. There was no need for me to understand him on a deeper level. A quick, pleasant journey would be best for all of us.

Having successfully transported a forestfolk on board my own ship would also help my reputation within the Empire as well. In that regard, this wasn't actually a bad deal for me.

At least, that's what I had thought until I learned more about just who this Acer was, and how he would get us through all sorts of trouble.

The first bit of trouble we ran into was our encounter with the Skrolm navy. As a rival kingdom to our destination of Mintar, they levied a "tax" on ships passing through their waters, effectively stealing a portion of the money and goods they carried. They hoped that would encourage merchants to visit Skrolm instead. Of course, Mintar did the same with merchants visiting Skrolm, so it wasn't like one of them was in the wrong, but it was a huge nuisance to merchant vessels like ours. Naturally, if escape was an option, we would take it. Luckily, with the distance between us and the current direction of the wind, outpacing them didn't seem impossible, so we ignored their calls for us to halt and increased our speed.

"Captain Suin, this direction is no good."

But in the middle of our attempted flight, Acer butted in. I was a bit frustrated at him for bothering me when I was at my busiest, so I asked him to be quiet

and leave us alone without much thought. Rather than take offense, he warned me that two more ships were waiting ahead of us. Looking ahead, there was no sign of any other ships. But Acer seemed quite sure of his claim, and so he had come to warn me, thinking it would be a problem.

To be quite honest, I doubted him a little. There was no evidence of any ships ahead of us, and our escape would be all but guaranteed if the way was in fact clear. But because our chances looked so good, it seemed more believable that a trap had been set. And above all, Acer had no reason to lie to me. As for how he could know about two ships waiting ahead of us while we still couldn't see them...I still don't know, but I'd heard that forestfolk had strange powers.

"If you go that way, you should be able to escape."

He then pointed south, and I decided to bet everything on him. That was probably the moment I stopped thinking of Acer as a passenger and started thinking of him as an ally.

And it hadn't been just me either. From that moment on, he seemed to meld seamlessly into the crew. Before I knew it, they were treating him as an old friend that had voyaged with them for years. He traded drinks with them, fished off the side of the ship with them, and even learned from them how to work the sails. There were even times he ended up climbing to the crow's nest. He leaped into a drunken brawl and knocked out seven sailors, only to come up laughing when the eighth took him down. Everyone on board, myself included, wanted to take him on as a permanent member of the crew. But he refused the invitation.

After disembarking in Mintar, I helped him search for a ship to take him farther west. I imagined the man who had asked me to take Acer on my ship felt much the same way I did then. It was hard to say goodbye to him, but I wanted to do everything I could to help. I knew I might never meet Acer again, but when I made it back to the Empire, there was a chance the guy who had asked me to take him would be in the same port. If the timing lined up well, we could trade stories about him over some drinks.

I could declare with pride that I had brought him safely to Mintar, and that I

had secured a reliable ship to take him farther west.

The Night the Fusou Tree Moved

For a time after that elf left, Gonzou spent a lot of time deep in thought. I was sure he just felt lonely. Though he didn't show it on his face, his manner spoke volumes. He was rarely honest with his feelings, but it wasn't hard to see past the surface to find them either.

But about ten days after he left, whatever sadness Gonzou felt was completely lifted.

"Gonzou! Look!" As I sat on the edge of the pond, I hurriedly called Gonzou from where he was lying on the porch. Concerned by my clearly unsettled voice, Gonzou stepped out into the courtyard. When he looked to where I was pointing, his jaw dropped. I was honestly a bit concerned it might fall off entirely. But that was to be expected. After all, in the light of the moon, we could see the Fusou Tree *moving*.

The Fusou Tree was the symbol of this kingdom, an enormous tree that reached up past the clouds, far larger than any mountain. But there was more to it than its size. Water flowed from the tree and across the entire island, making it a source of life for everyone living here. Without it, Fusou would be a much more difficult place to live. The people wouldn't even have the freedom to war with the oni.

The humans in Fusou revered the gods who created them and the ancestors who came before them. We merfolk and the skyfolk had different faiths, but we all held the Fusou Tree in special regard. Even our shared enemy, the oni, seemed to offer up prayers to it.

Anyone who lived here would be shocked to see the Fusou Tree moving. It was likely people would even see it as an expression of the tree's anger, and so view the event with fear. Even late at night, with nothing but the moonlight to illuminate it, there would be no small number of people watching it as they prayed. If we listened carefully, we could already hear shouts of surprise erupting across Oto.

However, I alone...no, Gonzou and I both knew instantly what had caused this to happen. There could be no other explanation than that elf.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Unbelievable! That pointy-eared guy must have been a mystic or something. This is amazing!” Gonzou laughed with childlike glee.

I felt very much the same way. There was no doubt the Fusou Tree moving was an event that would shake the entire island, and it would be some time before things calmed down. If the oni experienced a similar level of chaos, the front lines of the war would likely grow quiet for some time. But after having lived with the elf for a time, we knew that he didn't have a single malicious bone in his body. Rather than awe or fear, we saw the event as one of admiration and wonder.

There was one difference between how Gonzou and I saw this situation, though: what we believed about his true nature. Gonzou had said he must have been “a mystic or something.” That was the greatest praise he knew how to express for a person, but in truth, it was still not enough. That wasn't his fault, though.

The people who dwelt on land didn't know this, but there was a legend passed down among the merfolk about how the world had once come to an end. He was no doubt one of those who had been involved in bringing life back to the world afterward. He said he was a high elf, only a little different from the forestfolk we knew about, but I knew that he was one of what our legends called the forefathers, a true one. Rather than the mystics, he was closer in nature to the gods the humans here worshipped.

Long ago, the dragons burned the world to ash. At the time, the merfolk hid in the depths of the sea, and so were spared. That was how we knew of the world's previous destruction. Most races were reduced to ash, but a few were brought to the world above the clouds for safety. After the dragons returned to their rest, the people like him—the forefathers—brought greenery back to the world, and the people who had been saved returned from the sky back to the surface. They grew and multiplied, creating the world we saw today.

But none of that really mattered now. From the time we first met, I guessed that he was one of the forefathers, and feared that his arrival meant the world

—or at least Fusou—was soon to come to an end. But now, I knew there was nothing to fear. I knew now he lived with just as much of a grounded perspective as Gonzou and I.

I suppose saying I was “grounded” might mean something very different, being a merfolk, but what I mean to say is, he saw the world from the same perspective we did. I imagined that was no small source of suffering for him. Powerful beings drew all sorts of things to themselves, willingly or not, like a whirlpool in the deep ocean.

If by some stroke of terrible luck, he decided the kingdom of Fusou needed to be destroyed, I couldn’t help but accept his judgment. I knew that he would have suffered tremendously to come to that conclusion, and there must have been no other solution. If that happened, I wouldn’t flee back to the sea. I would happily accept that judgment right here, together with Gonzou.

“Hey, Mizuyo. This world is really an interesting place, isn’t it? I never expected to get so excited by something at my age.”

I nodded. We watched the tree move together, Gonzou’s face still full of childlike wonder.

When the elf had left, he had given me one of the fruits of life, something said to be a blessing of the forefathers. I didn’t know why. But, if I used it, even in his advanced age, I might be able to give Gonzou a child.

Is that what I should do? Is that what Gonzou wanted? I didn’t know. The idea scared me. But I had hesitated once, and now Gonzou had grown so old. I didn’t want to repeat the same mistake again. I had been given one more miraculous chance, and I didn’t want to let this one slip away.

If someday I would be able to hold a child of my own, I would tell them this story. Of their hero of a father, Gonzou. And of his friend, Acer, the high elf.

Hero of the West

Change the place, change the person. My foster father taught me that. Not just dress, skin color, or appearance, but the foods they ate, the customs they held, and even their ideas of right and wrong all changed based on where they

lived.

I thought that was fairly obvious. Those living in poor, severe conditions would develop a set of values that matched their environment in order to survive. Those who lived in wealth and luxury had the freedom to develop more diverse ways of thinking. And those were all influenced by the culture and history of the people living there. For example, even though they were both humans, those living in the center of the continent felt like entirely different creatures than those who lived here in the West.

Their religion here taught that humans were supreme, and they viewed other races as good for nothing but slavery. However, I knew that there must have been something in their history that had led to those beliefs.

The beastfolk that I now lived with held a deep-seated hatred for humanity, but that was a feeling I couldn't share. After all, when I was young, I traveled to all sorts of places and met all kinds of people. From elves to dwarves to humans, all of them had been so kind to me. I knew now that my foster father Acer had brought me to places like that on purpose, or worked hard to create those environments for me.

Could I do the same thing? Here, the humans and the other races—the beastfolk in particular—hated each other. As time went on, as the killing continued, that hatred grew stronger and stronger. I wanted to create a kind, loving place like Acer had.

Though my hands were now soaked in blood, that only strengthened my desire.

My first experience taking another's life was shortly after I began my journey.

South of the Great Pulha Woodlands, there was a small stretch of open land before you reached the sea, connecting the eastern and western sides of the continent. It was called the Pulha Highway, though virtually no one traveled it. Monsters often emerged from the woodlands and prowled the highway. If there had been some nation there, their army would have built garrisons, or their cities would have hired adventurers to deal with the monsters. But the Pulha Highway had been claimed by no one, so there was no organized effort

against the monsters emerging from the forest.

Of course, most of these monsters lived on the outskirts of the forest, and so were relatively weak as far as monsters went, but there were instances of more dangerous creatures appearing as well.

As dangerous as it was, those who chose to live there were either fleeing from civilized society or exiled from it. As impolite as it might be to say, they weren't good people. For those who dared to travel the Pulha Highway, the threat of the people living there was as large as the threat of monsters.

The first time I had taken another person's life was while traveling that highway. I had been attacked by a group of more than a dozen men, and killed half of them. I hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, and against one or two opponents I could have resolved things without taking anyone's lives. But I couldn't afford to go easy on all of them, so I hadn't even considered it. Though perhaps due to that lack of choice, I never had to wrestle with the decision either. I had no choice but to keep fighting until my opponents gave up and fled, and there had been no chance to reflect on my actions until the highway was already behind me. Before I could lament what I had done, I had grown used to it.

Long ago, Acer had taught me how to kill and process the animals we had hunted, so I was already used to seeing blood and had experience with death in general. In a sense, killing birds or beasts for food and killing others to protect yourself were both killing in the name of preserving your own life. They weren't all that different.

No...no, they were definitely *very* different. But not different enough that I couldn't turn a blind eye to it.

For a time after leaving the Pulha Highway, I hadn't needed to kill anyone. Even so, the land west of the Great Pulha Woodlands wasn't particularly peaceful. The main difference was that my experience traveling the Pulha Highway had taught me how to avoid getting myself into situations where the only way out was to fight.

Though the area I had reached was still technically the center of the continent, it was completely different from the eastern side of the woodlands.

On the western side, the beliefs of the people on the eastern side warred with the beliefs of those in the Far West. For example, the western religion taught that humans were naturally superior to all other races, while the eastern religion taught all races were equal as children of the harvest god. Both fought tooth and nail to win as many believers to their cause as possible.

Many kingdoms adopted the western religion officially, suppressing all others within their borders, while their equally powerful neighbors adhered to the eastern religion, creating an environment where people in quite a restricted area held radically different beliefs. As those beliefs became entangled with the diplomatic and power struggles in the region, they made the political situation all but opaque to outsiders.

Conflict escalated into war between these nations. Those who ascribed to the western beliefs captured and enslaved other races. In fact, some were all too happy to enslave other humans who didn't uphold the same religious beliefs.

When I first visited a nation that had adopted the western religion, I hadn't even been able to make it into a city. The moment I approached the gate, guards surrounded and tried to capture me. I had learned how to take care of myself by then, though, and so was able to extract myself from the situation without killing anyone.

I managed to make it out of the west-central region of the continent without taking any further lives thanks to my skill in swordsmanship and the help of the spirits. Both were skills I had refined since childhood.

One event that led to the worsening of the situation in the West was the elves abandoning the small forests. As nations ascribing to the western religion grew in number, they began to attack the elven settlements in their forests. As a result, those in smaller forests fled to other settlements in larger ones, took up arms, and began to make war against the humans.

These larger forests were likely those that were capable of supporting a Spirit Tree, like the one Acer had shown me once. According to him, these enormous trees could erect a barrier to keep people out, thus protecting the elves that lived there.

Naturally, as the elves left the smaller forests unattended, they became

breeding grounds for monsters that spilled out and threatened the lives of ordinary people. With the growing threat of monsters, the humans clung even harder to their religion as a mechanism to bind their society together.

But in this land, there were two primary belief systems: one that treated humans as superior to all other races, and one that worshipped the harvest god and strictly opposed such ideas. As their religious beliefs grew more entrenched, war breaking out between them became inevitable.

However, compared to the west-central region, the Far West was much worse off. There, all humans ascribed to that western religion and tried to exert their control over all other races. The number of people I had to kill on the Pulha Highway paled in comparison to what I did here.

As I knew my skill with a sword was insufficient, I had called on the spirits to take a huge number of lives in my stead. Not to defend myself, but because there was a beastfolk girl they had captured and were torturing to death, and I just couldn't let that go.



“Whatcha doing, Win? If you’re free, can you take a look at my weapon? It’s felt a bit off since the last fight.”

Calling to me from behind, Sabal draped herself over my shoulders. She was a member of the Fanged Tribe, one of the beastfolk races that had carnivorous traits.



When I had first saved her from her human captors, she had been a child. She had grown into a fully mature woman, but she was still just as clingy as ever, which was no small source of stress for me.

That said, if there was a problem with her weapon, that was a cause for concern. Beastfolk relied primarily on their strength for fighting. Being so much stronger than humans, the extra stress their fighting put on their weapons meant that any sort of deformity in it could easily lead to it breaking. The weapons I had made for the beastfolk had all been reinforced with that in mind, but it was still a danger. My master, Oswald, and Acer had told me time and again that when weapons broke like that, it was often in the most critical moment.

“Sure. I’ll take a look once I’m done writing this, so just leave it here.”

I felt Sabal’s weight shift on my back as she leaned forward to see what I was doing. Her boundless curiosity reminded me of a cat. It was nothing but a hindrance now, but I couldn’t bring myself to scold her for it. Though, since she wore leopard skins and a mask modeled after one in battle, calling her a cat out loud would probably make her quite angry.

“Is this another one of those letters to your father?”

I nodded as I began writing. Yes, this was a letter to Acer. It was nothing fancy, just another report to say that I was still doing well.

“What a good boy you are, keeping this up even though he never answers. But really, I’m curious about your father. Is he a weirdo like you?” she asked, apparently feeling a need for my immediate attention.

As she had said, Acer would probably never write me a response. I couldn’t blame him for that. My letters would pass through the hands of any number of people, so I couldn’t write anything about what I was actually up to in them, nor had I provided enough details for him to know where to send a response. I was always worried one of my letters might fall into enemy hands. He couldn’t reply even if he wanted to, so I wasn’t bothered by the long silence from him.

“What do you mean, ‘like me’? I’m nowhere near as messed up as he is.”

I couldn’t bear to be painted with the same brush as him. I might seem

strange to the beastfolk and the humans in the West, but I was nothing compared to Acer. I wasn't as quick to fight, I didn't share his love of alcohol, I wasn't nearly so overbearing, and I certainly wasn't as strong.

Ah, Acer was probably so weird because he was strong enough to force his will through. His way of thinking and open-minded approach to others all came from his overwhelming power. He was still grounded, but could occasionally have an almost transcendent perspective, all because of that strength. He was confident he could do anything it took to protect the people he loved and those right in front of him, which gave him room to be tolerant of others. I knew that if he was faced with a threat that seemed too much for him to handle on his own, Acer would become incredibly dangerous. Though that almost never happened.

If Acer had been the one to come here instead of me, it was quite possible the war would be long over. I didn't know how he'd make that happen, but it would almost certainly be through reckless force, yet done in such a way to result in the fewest possible victims.

I didn't possess the same strength he did, though. No matter how I struggled, I couldn't achieve the same results. Even knowing that people would die every day for as long as the fighting continued, I could do no more than move toward the solution one step at a time. Even if all the death I had caused made me unqualified to do so.

Every once in a while, I got the urge to ask Acer to come visit me, but that was the one thing I absolutely couldn't do. The conflict here had nothing to do with him. I wasn't some kid who would use his dad to make his wishes come true. No matter how strong he was, I didn't want to saddle him with an unnecessary burden. The problems here in the West needed to be solved by its own people, and by me since I had stuck my neck out by my own free will. That was for the best, and that was how I wanted it to be.

"Really? I think you're plenty weird, honestly. But I'm really glad you came anyway."

As Sabal whispered in my ear, I finished writing. Rather than asking for him to

come visit, I said that I hoped we would get to spar again someday. I didn't know how long it would take for that to happen, but when it did, I wanted to be able to tell him about how we had put an end to the war with our own hands.

Would he praise me for that? It was a bit embarrassing and childish to say I wanted him to...but knowing Acer, I was sure he would.

Side Story — The Feelings Carried in a Sword

One day, some time after I had begun my cultural exchange of trading blacksmithing knowledge with Old Saku, he made a proposal.

“I think I have a grasp on your nature now. So I have a suggestion. I have heard from Gonzou that you are quite the swordsman.”

Saying so, he handed me a katana. I wasn't quite sure what he was getting at, but I unsheathed the blade as he asked. It was quite the beautiful weapon, but it also had an overwhelming dreadfulness to it. It was like the tip of the blade was sucking me in. It was an incredible, atmospheric piece.

“Among all of the works I have spent my past years on, this one is the best I've ever made. I will lend it to you, so please use it for your daily practice.”

Wait, wait, wait. The unexpected request sent me reeling. This was no doubt an incredible weapon. Just being allowed to look at it felt like a reward. I could easily understand this being the best thing he'd made in years. But I didn't understand why he felt the need to lend it to me. And why for training?

“Of course, that is only an example. But the length, weight, curve, center of gravity...everything about it perfectly matches the historical customs of Fusou bladesmithing. I hope that by using that sword, you will come to a deeper understanding of what a katana is.”

I see. He was telling me to use this sword so I could learn how katana were to be used. Weapons were tools designed to take lives, whether they be of people or not. There was meaning behind their shape, their length, their weight. There was a purpose behind the curve in the blade, behind the placement of its center of gravity. He was telling me to learn all of that by using the weapon itself, not just by making them. For someone like me, who was an accomplished swordsman on top of being a blacksmith, that would enhance my understanding of the weapon.

But even so, I didn't see why he had to lend me such an incredible piece to do

it with. I wondered if there was more to it than he was letting on. Of course I had no intention of running off with it, but having him hand it to me so casually was a bit concerning.

Ah, perhaps that was why he made a comment about understanding my nature. If I were to run off with this weapon or treat it poorly, it wouldn't just be betraying Old Saku's trust in me, it would also be betraying Old Gon's trust, as he was the one who had introduced us. Once he had learned I wasn't the kind of person to do that, he was willing to lend it to me. And beyond that, maybe he thought that lending me such a masterwork would help me learn better than giving me an ordinary sword.

At any rate, the weight of his kindness felt heavy on my shoulders. I was incredibly grateful for the opportunity.

So for the rest of my stay in Outo, when no others were around to watch, I used Old Saku's sword for my daily training in order to learn the difference between the swords I knew and the katana of Fusou.

For example, despite actually weighing the same, the katana felt strangely lighter when swung or when taking a stance. Maybe that was because of the curved blade, or the center of gravity being closer to the hilt.

Of course, when I first held it, it felt very strange in my hands. The straight swords used by the Yosogi School had much in common with the katana Old Saku lent me, but that made the differences between them stand out all the more.

But as I used it for my daily training, going through the Yosogi School's forms, I realized something. Though it wasn't the case for all of them, a number of the forms felt much smoother using the katana than the usual straight sword. It felt so perfect, as if the techniques themselves had been designed for this very weapon.

The idea of the old Yosogi masters having abandoned this weapon after reaching the center of the continent filled me with a feeling of regret. They must have felt the same unpleasant sensation I did when they first took a straight sword in hand, or perhaps even more. Even so, they had put down

roots in that new land and left their techniques behind for their successors. That was why I had been able to meet Kaeha and learn the techniques of the Yosogi School myself.

Old Saku couldn't have known all of this when he lent me this sword, but now I felt I had reached a new level of passion, or a new level of desperation, to truly understand the use and forging of katana so that I could bring them back to the center of the continent.

This was the only way I could repay the debt I felt to my predecessors, who had connected me to so many important things in my life.

Afterword

This is Rarutori. Thank you for picking up the fourth volume of *Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored*.

Winter, huh? There might be a bit of a time gap between when I write this afterword and when the book actually releases, but still, it's quite cold out. What kind of impression does winter have on you?

A season of warm and delicious foods, like hotpot?

A season where the *sake* hits you deep?

A season where people long for the comfort of others?

A season full of all kinds of fun events?

Or perhaps a season characterized by the proverb "January passes, February flees, and March vanishes?"

I am sure it holds all sorts of meanings to each of you. But for me, it is a season of stuffing myself with good food, following it with good drink, and then hibernating. So let's get right to talking about alcohol.

The drink I'd like to introduce to you this time is called "*Mori no Kumasan*." It's made by Eikou Fuji, a brewery in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture. If you Google it, I'm sure it'll come up right away. It has a really cute label. When I went to a bar the other day, a very pretty lady working there (that part is very important) recommended it to me. It's kind of sweet and easy to drink, and it has a good aroma, so I took quite a liking to it.

The interesting thing about this drink is that the rice it's made from goes by the same name. Apparently it ranks quite well as far as varieties of rice go, having achieved "Special A Rank" multiple times in the past. I've never tried the rice itself, so I can't comment on that, but it does sound interesting to me.

Now that I think about it, the drink I introduced back in the afterword of volume one—"*Roze no Yukidoke*"—was a winter drink too, so you might be able

to get your hands on it around the time volume four releases. Volume one released in April, so it was probably pretty hard to find back then. If you are at all interested, please give it a try.

Volume four covered Acer's journey to Fusou, as well as the trip back home afterward. He experienced some very important partings, and he's seen and experienced all sorts of things that have started to change his way of thinking. As he continues to slowly grow, he will probably start handling things a bit differently than he used to. And with one journey at an end, after a short break, he will soon set a new goal for himself. I guess I'll leave that discussion for the afterword in volume five though. For now, let's talk about the themes of volume three.

The first chapter of volume three was themed after goodbyes. It was the most important goodbye Acer ever experienced. Normally hellos and goodbyes come in pairs, but they are not equal by any means. When you meet someone, you are taking a zero and adding a one, but when you say goodbye, you are losing everything you had built since then. If the relationship you've built adds up to a hundred, you lose all of it. To me, the impact of saying goodbye to someone far outweighs the impact of meeting someone new. However, even after saying goodbye to someone, there are still some things that remain. That was the story I wanted to tell in chapter one.

Chapter two's theme was about getting yourself moving again when you just wanted to stand still. Chapter three covered meeting new people. Chapters three through five focused on Acer's experience of new and different cultures. Chapter four's theme...or maybe motif was the kung fu movies I saw as a child, like the Bruce Lee movies. Chapter five's theme was transcendent beings.

That about covers it. Looking back on it now, chapter one seemed quite different from the rest, didn't it?

Besides that...ah, recently I started visiting a hedgehog café. Hedgehogs are really cute, aren't they? Surprisingly. When you pet them, their quills don't hurt you. However, hedgehogs are nocturnal, so when they sit on my lap and fall asleep, I feel really bad about touching them and waking them up.

Volume five will cover a bit of Acer's interactions with the modern Yosogi School, and his journey back to the forest of the high elves. I would be most grateful to see you there.

Afterword

Congratulations on the release of Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored volume 4! We're already at volume 4, but volume 1's release feels so recent!

The kingdom of Fusou, where Kaeha's swordsmanship finds its roots. Her swordsmanship was descended from the younger brother of Yuzuriha Yosogi, who escaped with his life thanks to her. He must have been a pretty skilled swordsman too, though. I'm kind of curious about him!

I really liked Mizuyo and Old Gon's relationship. Reading the book made me wish over and over that humans could live just a little longer (Tear). I'll be praying that their relationship endures for a long time! Live long, Old Gon!

As the generations go by, it feels sad to see the people Acer knew pass away. When he finally reunited with the elves, it gave me a sense of relief, like he had finally returned home. I hope Acer will be able to reunite with more characters that he's met before.

That's all from me this time. Thank you for reading!

Drawn





Bonus Short Story

Desire to Improve

A few months had passed since I'd begun living in Ha Forest in Zieden. I was lying on a grass mat, watching the young elf Shiez practice his archery, when he suddenly turned to me.

"Lord Acer, what's the trick to hitting the target?" His question was full of innocence, and there was no doubt in his eyes that I would provide a thorough and appropriate answer.

But...honestly, the question confused me. A "trick" to using a bow? Normally, all you'd need to do is aim properly. Did there have to be a trick to it? I didn't really understand the question, but Shiez had stopped what he was doing to wait for my answer, so I couldn't just say nothing.

"Aim carefully. Whether the target is moving or not, whether it's small or large, there's no way you can hit it if you don't aim properly."

Yeah, how was that for an answer? I felt like it was a pretty good response.

But Shiez's expression was one of surprise, or perhaps disappointment. "Yes, umm... I'm trying to aim, but I still can't hit it," he replied, despondent.

Apparently I had missed the mark myself. What was I supposed to say now?

Honestly speaking, I had never thought there was much of a trick to archery. I obviously hadn't been good at it from the moment I was born, but at least as far as I could remember, I'd never been worried about trying to get better. All my training in archery had happened when I still lived in the Forest Depths, as a way of passing the time. I was never really concerned with improving my skill.

The older high elves had taught me the proper way to hold a bow, but I had figured out the rest mostly on my own. On rare occasions I practiced with another high elf close to my age, but it wasn't like we had been competing.

Once I learned how to fire an arrow, I practiced doing so into the bushes.

Once I could reliably shoot straight, I set up a target. Once I could hit the target, I set it farther away. Once that became too easy, I made the target smaller. Once I got bored of that, I'd put the target in a spot I'd have to fire between numerous trees to reach. Then I progressed to hitting a target while running, or while jumping from branch to branch, or by arcing arrows over an obstacle that completely obscured the target. I'd raise the difficulty as I improved, but even if I didn't get any better, I could keep doing the same thing. I was just killing time, after all.

I probably had some latent talent for archery, as it had become one of my most reliable skills without much perceived difficulty on my part. I had never thought about archery as something I wanted to get better at, like Shiez was now.

But even with his incredible life span, Shiez was looking to improve here and now. That was quite impressive to me. Ah, though perhaps due to the recent instability in the region, even a child like him might have felt the need to be skilled at using weapons.

In any case, I still needed to think of better advice to give him. Kaeha was very good at that. Okay, at the start she had been a terrible teacher, but when we met later she had improved quite a bit. She must have gone through a lot, learning how to properly teach her students as head of the Yosogi School. Since she had taught me, I was pretty confident in my ability to teach the Yosogi style of swordsmanship.

Though, hmm. Yeah. As for teaching in general...I had learned blacksmithing from Oswald, swordsmanship from Kaeha, and magic from Kawshman. I had personally taught the kids on the grasslands quite a bit as well, so I had a fair amount of experience.

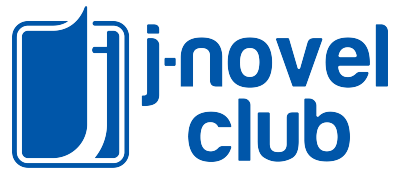
I closed my eyes and thought for a moment. If I changed the way I thought about it, there were a number of things I could tell him. I didn't know a "trick" for archery, but if I saw him practice, I could point out what he was doing wrong. There was no reason I couldn't help him fix those things. That should at least help him improve compared to where he was now.

"You're not hitting the target because you're too worried about hitting the

target. When you release the arrow, you're too stiff. Don't worry so much about actually hitting anything. Like I said before, if you aim properly, you'll hit the target fine. Just let the arrow flow naturally."

Opening my eyes, I pointed out one of his quirks, connecting the point to my previous statement. That finally got a smile out of him as he turned, nocked an arrow, and sized up his target once more. Of course, just because he knew the solution didn't mean it was so easy to put into practice. It would take repetition to get it right.

I had managed to save my reputation here, though just barely. I'd call that a job well done.



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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 4

by rarutori

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Austin Conrad

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